

Decentralisation Community

Role of PRIs in Community Water and Sanitation Services: Examples and Experiences

The Decentralization Community of Solution Exchange, an initiative of the United Nations in India, provides a platform for increasing our understanding of local governance-both rural and urban- through knowledge sharing and collaboration. We bring to you the summary of the discussions held recently.

Query: 1. The capacity of PRIs to plan, monitor and maintain community water and sanitation facilities. 2.Examples that prove that higher involvement of PRIs in planning, monitoring and maintenance of community water and sanitation leads to better results? 3. Are the design, construction and maintenance of community water and sanitation facilities supported by MGNREGS and other livelihood promotion schemes of the central and state governments? Summary of Responses

Gram Panchayats (GPs) are the gateway for all rural development, and through their Village Water and Sanitation Committees (VWSCs), are tasked with executing water and sanitation projects. However, the consensus among development practitioners as well as panchayat members is GPs usually lack both knowledge and money to carry these out effectively, notable exceptions being GPs in Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Gujarat.

Panchayats are supposed to facilitate and implement water and sanitation programmes in their villages, calculate and collect user tariffs, pay pump operators and maintain hardware for water infrastructure. They also have to lead sanitation programmes in the village, mobilize communities and ensure villages achieve and maintain all the parameters specified under Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC). Where GPs have led the process, the results in providing drinking water and maintaining sanitary conditions have been very good; the reverse is also true.

Panchayats have a tremendous potential to make a difference in service delivery of water and sanitation provided they are adequately resourced in the three 3Fs – funds, functions and functionaries. The Centre has a major role to play in the provisioning of the 3Fs through both Centrally Sponsored Schemes and Additional Central Assistance Schemes to the units of self-government. State financial commissions and district planning committees also play a major role in this process. At a more specific level, GPs have to plan for drinking water while the technical staff in line departments have to be accountable to the VWSCs. Additionally, the Committees should have the flexibility to outsource drinking water schemes in consultation with the gram sabha. However, in practice, most panchayats are not involved in planning for drinking water but are handed over completed schemes for operation and maintenance. These schemes have a high failure rate since GPs and communities have little or no stake in them and panchayats find themselves ill-equipped to work out and collect user charges.

On the other hand, the higher involvement of panchayats leads to better outcomes. In Maharashtra, for example, GPs and VWSCs have planned, implemented and managed projects that have done very well. In the state, under the Sant Gadge Baba Swachata Abhiyaan, several GPs launched campaigns to improve their villages' standard of living. In Mahalunge village, Thane District, Maharashtra, participated in the Abhiyaan in 2000 and won several awards. The panchayat president was inspired by Ralegon Siddhi where

Annasaheb Hazare has brought several revolutionary changes. The villagers have achieved and sustained open defecation free status, gobar gas units to process human excreta and cowdung, soak pits to absorb grey water, waste segregation at source and community garbage dumps. Another example is Dhamner village where the sarpanch drove the process of change.

In Haryana's Sirsa district, the Kaluana panchayat won an award under the State Incentive Scheme for Sanitation as it had led the process of change. It implemented programmes to improve sanitation, solid waste management and rooftop rainwater harvesting, as well as used funds from the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme for tree plantation and watershed development. Other states where GPs have used funds from MGNREGA for water and sanitation are Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra and Gujarat.

In Andhra Pradesh's Warangal district, the GP of Gangadevipally village has successfully channelized all development activities, planned drinking water schemes and reduced water consumption by domestic and agricultural sectors. It has commissioned a water filtration plant to remove fluoride that provides drinking water at Re 1 for 20 litres. The GP has set up a committee to ensure nobody defecates in the open by imposing a hefty fine.

There is another equally effective approach where NGOs catalyse the empowerment of panchayats. Gramalaya, Tiruchirappally, Tamil Nadu, set up Association for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (AWASH) committees in 400 villages. The panchayat president is the committee's advisor and participates in its monthly meetings; thus, the two institutions work closely with each other. Similarly, in West Bengal's East Medinipur district, the Rama Krishna Lok Shiksha Parishad incubated sanitation programmes and initiated them in its project areas. It involved and built the capacity of panchayats and women's groups; the Parishad also leveraged funds from UNICEF and the state government.

Sahjeevan, an NGO in Kutch, Gujarat has trained GPs to manage drinking water schemes; the panchayats had no prior experience in doing so. In Bharatpur, Rajasthan, an NGO has revived several village ponds (pokhars) but those restored by GPs using funds from MGNREGA are in bad shape; leadership and community buy-in are more important than leveraging funds from government schemes.

These examples show where panchayats have the 3Fs in place, they notch up good results in water sanitation, though the reverse also holds true. NGOs can catalyse this process of empowering GPs as well as communities to demand better services. The experience from MGNREGA and other government schemes is mixed and again depends on the quality of the panchayat representatives.

For complete responses including related resources and documentation, to join the discussion or to become a member of Decentralisation Community, please write to Joy Elamon (joy.elamon@un.org.in) or Tina Mathur (tina.mathur@un.org.in)