

How Relevant Are Rural Water Supply Programmes?

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An evaluation study of the rural water supply programme in eight districts of eastern UP reveals a low level of coverage and poor maintenance record. If the safe water programme is to be effectively implemented, greater participation from the local people, especially women, is needed.

IN a country where around 1.5 million children below the age of five years die due to water-borne diseases every year, and the nation loses 1,800 million person-hours (over 200 million mandays), the supply of safe drinking water has been given a high priority in Indian planning. Responsibility for providing safe drinking water in rural areas rests with the states, and funds have been provided in the state budgets right from the commencement of the First Five-Year Plan. It was envisaged that the states would build up the necessary infrastructure to attend to the problems of water supply and sanitation. In spite of all these efforts, it was observed during the mid-1960s that these schemes were being implemented only in villages with easy access. The Government of India therefore requested the states to identify hard-core problem areas and provided assistance to the states to carry out special investigations during the Fourth Plan. In 1972-73, in yet another effort to accelerate the pace of coverage, the centre introduced the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Scheme (ARWS) to cover the problem areas with 100 per cent grant. In August 1985, the subject of rural water supply and sanitation was transferred from the ministry of urban development to the department of rural development with the basic objective of securing the implementation of the programme and its integration with other rural development programmes.

Despite the impressive coverage of rural areas in subsequent plans, the conditions prevailing in rural areas remain far from satisfactory. Just when it was thought that there were hardly 500 villages left to be provided with safe drinking water (at the commencement of the Eighth Plan), the subsequent feed-back from the field depicted a different picture. Many of the previously covered areas had fallen back into the 'no source' (NC) category, and these figures assumed alarming proportions which subsequently called for another round of investigation.

Accepting the norms laid down by the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission for classifying habitations into

partially covered (PC) and fully covered (FC) categories, as well as for identifying sources as 'safe sources', the study described here evaluated the current status of safe water in eight sample districts of eastern Uttar Pradesh. Specifically, it focused on: (a) the pattern of NC (not covered) habitations; (b) the level of water supply and types of system being used; (c) the problem of non-perenniality, if any, and related issues, viz. period of non-operation, water quality, and environmental problems, and identification of plausible factors; and (d) community participation, women's involvement, communities' perception of the programme agenda.

The study, undertaken by the G B Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, on behalf of the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission in 1994-95, covered 3,715 habitations from the following eight districts of eastern UP: Azamgarh, Bahraich, Basti, Gorakhpur, Gonda, Maharajganj, Mau and Sidharathnagar.

Of these, 35.8 per cent were main habitations and 64.2 per cent were 'other' habitations. The survey revealed that only a little over 31 per cent of the habitations have been provided with 100 per cent coverage. Moreover, the progress achieved in the main habitations has been much better than in the 'other' habitations. While 45 per cent of main habitations qualified for the 'FC' norm, the level was barely under 24 per cent in the other habitations. However, the survey revealed that in hardly 0.02 per cent of habitations, less than 10 per cent of the population had been provided with safe water supply, which indicates the progress of the nodal agency. But the emphasis has been on the coverage of main habitations. Even the inter-regional comparison of coverage pattern shows uneven progress, with the highest being at just under 60 per cent achieved in Basti and lowest in Mau district at a little over 12 per cent.

The study of distribution pattern of resources is yet another indicator for evaluating the nodal agency's progress. A sizeable proportion of the inhabitants in the region (over 75 per cent) have to depend on

sources which have not been declared to be safe sources. Just 23 per cent of habitations had access to safe drinking sources, and the proportion depending on unsafe sources was much higher in districts like Gonda, Mau and Maharajganj, where over 88 per cent and 82 per cent of local inhabitants were exposed to unsafe sources, respectively.

The analysis also shows that the entire region had a very low level of incidence of non-perenniality. In all, only 11 sources accounting for a little over 0.11 per cent of the total sources were facing this problem, out of which 56 or 54 per cent belonged to main habitations and the remaining 45 per cent were located in other habitations.

The districts which suffered most from this problem were Azamgarh, Gorakhpur and Maharajganj. In addition, the pattern of defunct resources reveals the shocking state of upkeep of these precious resources.

The success of any programme depends to a large extent upon the extent to which it motivates the people of the area and induces them to take an active part in the developmental programmes initiated in their region. The study of participation of communities in the region is not encouraging, as only a little over 36 per cent of the inhabitants in the entire region had been involved in the planning, selection of location, etc. of which the level of participation in the main habitations was almost twice of what it had been in the other habitations. Similarly, community participation in other sample districts showed a marked variation, with Basti heading the overall list and Mau finishing at the bottom.

The other aspect which the study highlights is the inhabitants' total indifference or antipathy towards the operation and maintenance part of the programme. Only 16 per cent of the inhabitants expressed their willingness to participate. Hardly 22 per cent of the sources have been properly looked after. It was also shocking to note that there are no records of 16 per cent of the resources, it is presumed that these may have been installed by other agencies working in the region whose details are not with the nodal agency. Fourteen per cent of the sources were being maintained by the nodal agency, a little over 6 per cent by block officials, whereas the proportion of NGOs operating in this area was less than 1 per cent.

Similarly, the inhabitants' indifferent attitude towards the programme could be seen in the extent to which they volunteer to maintain the resources implemented within their region. The study shows that a little over 5 per cent of inhabitants had agreed to maintain these resources; once again their ratio was much higher in main habitation as compared to their counterparts. However, there has been a shift in the stand of inhabitants on the question of payment for

the maintenance of resources. Around 22 per cent of the inhabitants expressed willingness to share the burden of maintenance.

The development of the region on a sustainable basis is possible only if women also participate in the programme in a big way. A higher level of female participation ensures brighter chances of success. However, the study of female participation in the programmes in the region shows a dismal picture, and could be one of the cardinal factors affecting the performance of the programme. It could be seen that women have virtually been sidelined, as their involvement for the region as a whole was barely 1 per cent (0.81 per cent to be precise). What was really shocking was to see that in Sidharthnagar and Mau their participation was nil.

The study clearly shows that the performance of the normal water supply programme in the region has been somewhat disappointing. However, before arriving at any conclusion it would be befitting to examine some of the key issues. The analysis clearly shows that one of the prime reasons for the poor performance has been the local inhabitants' poor response to these programmes. According to them, the venue selected for installing the public stand post gets frequently shifted to a new place for no apparent reason. They allege that this takes place at the behest of a few influential people, who with the passage of time, start treating these resources as their own property. This was partially corroborated by the nodal agency during the course of discussion. According to them, since the agency has no budgetary provision for maintenance of the resource, they have to depend on local resources, which only a few influential people could afford. The price of installing the new handpump generally takes about three to four days and takes the assistance of at least four men. The task of feeding these personnel, therefore, lies with local inhabitants. This situation is exploited to the hilt. However, according to the agency such instances do not happen frequently.

Another factor contributing to poor performance is the deliberate omission of local inhabitants at the crucial 'gaon sabha' or village council meetings, during which all major decisions and programmes for village development are chalked out. The inhabitants, by and large, claimed that they are often not informed on time about such meetings; as a result they seldom participate.

All these considerations have forced a sizeable proportion of the population to utilise 'other' sources which are highly unsafe, and it was not surprising to find every alternate household having a shallow handpump at its doorstep. This not only exposes the inhabitants to various kinds of health hazard but also lowers the image of the nodal agency

in the eyes of the public. As the region has not experienced any outbreak of water-borne epidemics in recent times, the concept of 'safe' sources has not been seriously entertained by the inhabitants. However, there have been a few stray cases in two districts, Maharajganj and Gorakhpur, in which the water discharged from shallow handpumps contained excess iron content as shown by its physical appearance. Similarly, in Khalilabad tehsil of Basti district and in Nawabganj tehsil of Gondal district, the water emanating from shallow handpumps contained some foul smell, which may have been because those places had sugar factories in the vicinity and their discharge seems to have affected the first strata of the underground water table.

The study also highlights the overwhelming priority the 'main' habitations got over the 'other' habitations. This may be due to locational advantage, i.e., better infrastructural facilities and more importantly proximity to power, as it was observed that the representation of these areas in the gaon sabha or village councils was regular and 'gram pradhans' generally hailed from these habitations. In the light of the above observations, it would be better if the other habitations also get a chance at representation; for this purpose the post of gram pradhan could be on a rotation basis.

The norm of classifying habitations into partially covered and fully covered based on distance appears to be quite unrealistic, since it does not reflect the actual programmes of the nodal agency. It is mainly women who find this distance quite inconvenient to trek, besides attending to other household chores. Moreover, the distance as measured by the nodal agency is based on a 'straight line pattern', which is not in conformity to the ground realities. These habitations, for all practical purposes, remain NC habitations. Therefore, it is argued that it would be appropriate if this distance norm is further brought down to, say, 150 to 200 metres, which is possible only if more such public hydrants are installed and their distribution is evenly marked.

The study also observed that apart from the nodal agency, there were other agencies or co-operatives/organisations which were engaged in similar work. However, what was most disturbing about their functioning was the total lack of co-ordination between them; this may be one reason for the poor upkeep of these resources, as one agency does not keep any record of the previous one's work. As a result, the work at times, gets duplicated, which limits the scope of the programme. Hence, if some sort of co-ordination is evolved between various agencies in the region, not only will the performance of the programme improve

but its coverage will be considerably enhanced.

It was also noted that though the agency provided mechanics at each block with the primary function of attending to defunct sources, they had a very large area to attend to, which at times became quite difficult if not altogether impossible for them to cover within the given time-frame. Since the nodal agency did not have provision for allowances, the mechanics gradually lost interest in the work and subsequently had to rely on local inhabitants' resources. Besides, the callous attitude adopted by the inhabitants in not relaying information in time also compounded the matter, and the task of rejuvenating defunct sources naturally suffered. In this regard, it could be suggested that the mechanics may be posted at the village panchayat level, which will decrease their area of work and improve their efficiency.

The nodal agency's policy of not permitting mechanics from outside to attend to defunct resources also spelt disaster for the programme and needs to be modified because it is based on unsound premises. It is true that the repair of hydrants requires specialised training and capital intensive accessories, which the local mechanics lack. But given the present scenario, it would be quite pertinent to encourage local talent to emerge under their supervision. This gesture would help to overcome the problem of the heavy load on agency mechanics, and would subsequently promote a sense of belonging, responsibility and interest in these resources among the inhabitants.

Similarly, the study shows that the rate of participation by non-government agencies has been minimal. Their integration into the rural development programme would not only help in tiding over many problems which the agency faces, viz, under-staffing, lack of co-ordination, etc but would lend some credibility to it in the eyes of the inhabitants. Likewise, their services could be utilised in the areas of creating general awareness, promoting health, hygiene, and education.

Note

- 1 The ARWS is a centrally sponsored plan scheme supplementing the efforts of state governments in providing drinking water in rural areas. During the Sixth Plan, the aim was to provide at least one source in all the 2,31,000 identified problem villages that had remained uncovered at the commencement of the Sixth Plan. With intensive efforts and investment to the order of Rs 2,457 crore (Rs 1,538 crore under state sector MNP and Rs 919 crore under central sector ARWSP), it was possible to cover 1,92,000 problem villages. However, about 39,000 hard-core villages spilled over to the Seventh Plan.