



CASE STUDIES FOR CHANGE

■ ■ ■ **KEY FINDINGS**

- Non-functionality of handpumps was reduced, as well as response time to breakdowns, by establishing local service provision arrangements, in combination with a network of handpump mechanics for support in major repairs.
- Ambiguities around responsibility for operation and maintenance costs, however, mean that communities often still rely on local government, resulting in extended downtime.
- Scaling up the arrangements established by Water For People will require institutionalisation by local government—a crucial and perhaps underappreciated player in achieving sustainable services at scale.

Since 2006, Water For People has been concentrating its efforts in West Bengal on achieving full coverage in two administrative ‘blocks’: Sagar and Patharpratima—groups of islands in the Sundarban area. The NGO had been concerned about sustainability from the outset but began to increase its focus on the issue around 2010, after realising that many water committees were not performing and that a large percentage of water points were not functional.

To improve the likelihood that installed or rehabilitated water points would remain in good working order, Water For People began to address some of the gaps in local service provision arrangements. This work centred on ensuring functioning water user committees capable of collecting tariffs and undertaking maintenance and simple repairs, and establishing a network of handpump mechanics to carry out more technically demanding tasks.



We started realising that many water committees were not performing well and that 30-40% of the water points didn't work. We then had to put more emphasis on sustainability."

Sudipta Barman, Programme Head at partner NGO, Sabuj Sangha

Water For People's slogan is Everyone, Forever. An earlier case study, 'Everyone, Forever? Scaling-up rural water and sanitation in Chinda, Honduras', examined their approach of concentrating effort to achieve full coverage in a given administrative area (everyone), and their work on sustainability (forever). This case study on their work in India focuses primarily on the NGO's efforts to fulfil the forever aspect of their mission.

When Water For People first began work in Patharpratima and Sagar, coverage for water supply was around 75 and 95% for the respective blocks, but 30-40% of water points were estimated to be non-functional. As in most parts of West Bengal, few people paid for water services and most water points didn't have a water committee. The Gram Panchayats, the lowest level of local government, acted as de facto service providers—often not very effectively. They struggled to organise repairs, resulting in long downtimes and broken water points.

■ ■ ■ APPROACH

To increase water supply coverage, the NGO installed new tubewells and rehabilitated those that had broken down. All in all, Water For People has intervened in about 20% of all water points in the two blocks, representing 459 points. The NGO followed a standard demand-responsive approach, where communities would articulate their demand for new or rehabilitated water points through the Gram Panchayats.

Communities were asked to contribute to capital investments alongside the contributions made by Water For People and the Gram Panchayats.

To address the sustainability problem, Water For People worked to strengthen local service providers and enhance support for major repairs and monitoring for the water points that it installed or rehabilitated.

Specifically Water For People:

- **Set up and trained 459 water committees** to take responsibility for some of the operation, maintenance and administration tasks. This included establishing tariffs and corresponding bookkeeping systems to ensure coverage of some of the future operation and maintenance costs.
- **Established a network of handpump mechanics**, called Jalabandhus (literally 'friends of water' in Bengali), to provide major repair services. This entailed the initial training of 20 Jalabandhus in each block and provision of toolkits, and the promotion of their services among Gram Panchayats and water committees.
- **Mapped all water points**, and indicated their status in terms of functionality, service level provided and performance of the water committee as service provider, using FLOW (Field-Level Operations Watch), a web-based information system.



The main contribution made by Water For People is through the innovations and ideas they brought, for example FLOW, the Jalabandhus and water committees."

Gouri Haldar (pictured at right),
Sabhapati (president) of Patharpratima





If the community has the money, we do the repair within a day or two. If they don't have the money, we first need to get confirmation against a quote to the Gram Panchayat, and this takes several days."

Jalabandhu



Members of the Mahendragunge water committee

LOCAL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES

At all water points where the programme intervened, a local management committee (either a dedicated water committee or a local 'self-help group' carrying out tasks related to water supply) was established and trained. Though water committees are a standard component of many rural water supply programmes in India, in Sagar and Patharpratima they are a relatively new type of institution. And still an estimated 25% of water points in the blocks have no active local organisation.

The main benefit of such committees is that they can undertake more rapid repairs in the case of simple faults, without having to wait for the Gram Panchayat to take action. Even if the repair cannot be done by the committee, they can engage the services of a Jalabandhu directly. They are able to charge a tariff to cover recurrent costs of operation and maintenance of services and raise money from users on an as-needed basis for repairs.

HANDPUMP MECHANICS

The network of handpump mechanics, Jalabandhus, established through the programme has also helped reduce downtime. If the water committee is able to pay them directly, they are able to complete a repair within one or two days. When a village doesn't have funds to cover repair costs, the Jalabandhu must submit a quotation for the work to the Gram Panchayat. Only

once this is approved, can they carry out the repair. This process may take up to a week. Particularly for minor repairs, water users often prefer to pay themselves rather than wait.

Now that the network has been operating for a few years, the Jalabandhus have begun branching out and offering new services, such as plumbing repairs for piped schemes, water point monitoring and routine preventive maintenance under contract with the Gram Panchayats. These are activities that contribute to improved service delivery and the diversification of Jalabandhus' income base.

STRENGTHENING SERVICE AUTHORITY FUNCTIONS

The programme did not explicitly set out to strengthen the capacity of the Gram Panchayats to fulfil their service authority functions, but nevertheless it has had an impact. The programme has worked closely with the block governments and Gram Panchayats to jointly plan new investment and coordinate activities, and it has encouraged them to institutionalise the various innovations around service delivery, such as the water committees, Jalabandhus and tariffs. The programme has also raised interest among the Gram Panchayats in service delivery monitoring and the use of FLOW. But capacity still needs to be built for them to analyse FLOW results and apply the information to planning.



We have issued a letter that all water points need to have a water committee. Now about half of all water points have one, though many are not active.”

Rabindranath Bera (pictured at right),
Upa-Pradhan (Vice President) of Digambarpur
Gram Panchayat



RESULTS

Both blocks can be considered islands of success, having achieved high levels of coverage at scale. The combined population of the two blocks is 550,000. In Sagar, full coverage has all but been achieved, and in Patharpratima, coverage is around 80%—representing a 5% coverage gain.

There has been progress on sustainability, as witnessed in improved non-functionality rates. Overall non-functionality is down to 18% (from 30-40% before the intervention) in the two blocks. For the water points where Water For People directly intervened, non-functionality is down to 5%.

The FLOW survey showed that 95% of committees where Water For People intervened are now charging a tariff—typically between 2-5 Rs per family per month (US\$ 0.04-0.10). The same survey found that at the majority of water points where the NGO had not intervened, no tariffs were being collected. Overall, only 10% of water points in Sagar and 25% of water points in Patharpratima have instituted a regular tariff collection.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

In spite of the improvements, the FLOW survey ranks the likelihood of sustainability at an intermediate level. The main reason: the improvements have not been scaled to all water points in the block, leaving many water points without a water committee or tariff collection to cover repairs. Some Gram Panchayats have issued resolutions that all water points should have a water committee and that all users should pay a tariff for service. These resolutions have yet to be regulated or enforced.

The committees themselves suffer many of the same weaknesses commonly seen in the community-based management model. Their voluntary nature puts them at high risk of attrition. Few are formally registered as service providers. The absence of a legal status limits their authority to handle user tariffs and formally carry out service provision tasks.

In addition, it is not clear how the cost for major repairs should be shared between the Gram Panchayats and water committees—potentially leaving water points down for months as financing is sought. ■

ABOUT THE CASE STUDY

This case study is based on the report “Islands of success: Towards water, sanitation and hygiene services for everyone, forever in Patharpratima and Sagar blocks, West Bengal, India” written by Stef Smits and Kurian Baby of IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre, with inputs from the Water for People India team. The study was co-financed by Water For People (WFP) and Triple-S (Sustainable Services at Scale), an IRC initiative to promote water services that last. The full report, which includes a fuller treatment of the WFP approach and covers not only water supply but also sanitation and WASH at schools, is available at: www.waterservicesthatlast.org/WFPIndia.