From sector reform to *Swajaldhara* – scaling up in India

A.J. James

How do you scale up rural water supply pilot projects to cover a country of 1.4 million villages? How do you convey the message that water resources are limited, and that local contributions are needed to maintain supplies? *Swajaldhara* is the Indian Government's programme attempting to do this.

In December 2002, the Government of India launched the *Swajaldhara* programme for national rural drinking-water supply, based on principles of community management, demand responsiveness and participation. *Swajaldhara* (which is loosely translated as 'streams of pure water') had been piloted since 1999 through the Sector Reform Pilot Projects (SRPPs) in 67 districts in 26 (out of 29) Indian states. Implemented by the Rajiv Gandhi National Drinking Water Mission (RGNDWM) of the Ministry of Rural Development, it is a huge step and a bold break from the past.

In the 50 years since independence in 1947, Indian government investment in rural water supply and sanitation had been supply driven and top down. But poor operation and maintenance (O&M) was causing a number of water supply systems to fail, and water was seen by rural communities not as a scarce socio-economic resource requiring local management, but as a social right to be provided free of cost by the government. A comprehensive review of water resource management in India concluded that 'India faces an increasingly urgent situation; its finite and fragile water resources are stressed and depleting while different sectoral demands are growing rapidly', and that 'replacement costs of water supply hardware are several times the available budget'.[1]

Sector reform pilot projects

The SRPPs were to implement a participatory and demand-driven approach to water supply, with a focus on village-level capacity building, integrated service delivery, cost sharing by users and conservation measures for source sustainability. The pilots aimed to empower villagers to participate fully in project decision making, including scheme design, management and financing. Villagers (assisted by district government officials and NGOs) planned new or augmented water supply systems, applied to government for funds and implemented the project once funds were sanctioned. Community contributions (10 per cent) were collected, and villagers then managed the scheme (paying 100 per cent of O&M costs). External support agencies, including UNICEF and the Water and Sanitation Programme, helped state and district governments implement the SRPPs across the country for nearly three years. Then, on Christmas Day 2002 *Swajaldhara* was launched, effectively scaling up the SRPP to the entire country, with the same key principles (see Table 1).

Scaling up sector reform – *Swajaldhara*

Guidelines for implementing *Swajaldhara* were circulated to state governments in December 2002 and June 2003.[2]

Villages were to formulate plans for water supply schemes with district government officials and submit proposals for funding. Each state government Rural Water Supply Department issued government orders to district engineers, and the District Collectors (bureaucratic heads of the district governments) were also informed. Each district then worked out how best to implement the programme, calling on local NGOs and other resource persons to help. This was probably easier in the 67 SRPP districts (out of 601 districts in total) than for the other districts, and implementation has been uneven.

With 28 states and 7 union territories, and with some states the size of medium-sized developing countries, the institutional structure for rural water supply and sanitation is quite complex (Figure 1). In the four-tier government structure (national, state, district and village), the core of the *Swajaldhara* is the Village Water and Sanitation Committee, supported by the government-staffed District Water and Sanitation Missions and District Water and Sanitation Committees that include NGOs as well.

In April 2001, before *Swajaldhara*, around 88 per cent of India's 1.4 million rural habitations ('habitation' is the

Table 1. Key principles of *Swajaldhara*[2]

1. Demand-responsive, adaptable approach with full community participation.
2. Communities to own drinking water assets and to plan, implement, operate, maintain and manage WSS schemes.
3. Users to pay part of capital cost and all of O&M cost.
4. Systems to include rainwater harvesting and groundwater recharge systems (e.g. water harvested from roof tops is channelled into old disused wells, or next to tube-wells)
5. Government to shift its role from direct service delivery to that of planning, policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation, and partial financial support.

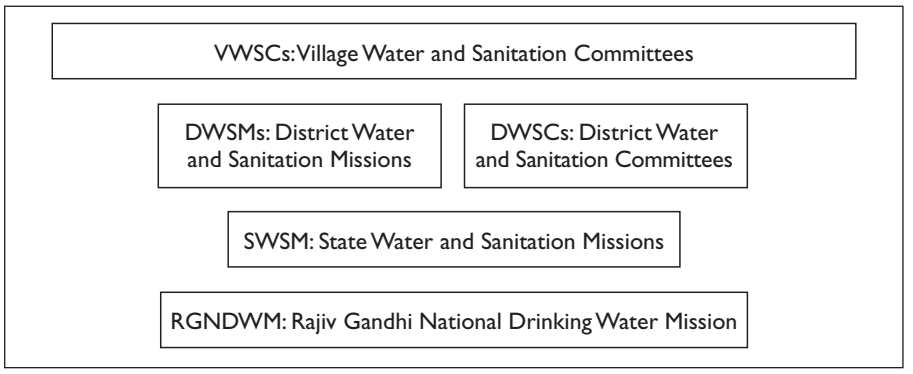

Figure 1 Institutional structure in water supply and sanitation in India

government's term for a small village) had been 'fully covered' with safe potable drinking water supply (following the RGNDWM norms of 40 litres per person per day, within a reasonable distance). By April 2004, this proportion had risen to 94 per cent, but the RGNDWM recognizes that its coverage surveys (last done in 1993, and now in 2003) do not assess all 12 months of the year, that there still are habitations with water quality problems, and that even 'fully covered' habitations can slip back during extreme summer weather. Note also that the increase of 6 per cent coverage has been achieved by a mixture of the earlier Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme and *Swajaldhara*, but working in a 'community management' mode. *Swajaldhara* is now to be prioritized for the 6 per cent of habitations that are not currently 'fully covered'. But more needs to be done: even in a water-rich state like Kerala there are pockets of acute water shortage, with dug wells drying up in hilly pockets and traditional water sources that have little support from the official government programme.[3]

Beyond *Swajaldhara*

The successful national-level policy change to a demand-driven, participatory and community managed rural water supply for 700 million rural users represents a stupendous effort by the Government of India. Soon it is likely to come very close to the statistical goal of 100 per cent coverage. But to be effective and sustainable, this scaling up needs to address at least two major challenges: working within Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) frameworks, and improving the quality of implementation.

Working within IWRM

Given the linkages between upstream and downstream villages and between rural, urban and peri-urban supplies, as well as the rapidity of groundwater mining in many parts of semi-arid India, future source sustainability is definitely at risk. Two key options are:

- *To integrate water supply planning within water resource development and watershed development.* Decision-support frameworks for water resources planning are now available for district level.[4]
- *Initiate community-level demand regulation.* Effective community-level demand management (for example, controlling irrigated summer cultivation, borehole depths and the drilling of new boreholes) is urgently needed.

Quality of implementation

Translating principles and guidelines into action requires local-level government and NGO staff to be trained in programme principles and district-level staff to develop effective information campaigns, capacity-building and monitoring systems:

- *Stimulate detailed local-level discussion.* Workshops, multi-stakeholder discussions and clear manuals on implementation based on existing experience can help to answer some of these questions: Should replacement costs be part of annual O&M costs? How can we publicize project information for the illiterate? (Box 1 provides some possible solutions).
- *Address constraints to effective capacity building.* How can the cascade system of training (from state to district to local levels) be supplemented by horizontal learning across communities?
- *Effective monitoring.* Apart from coverage and money spent, monitoring should measure: the effectiveness of training, the quality of community management, participation by women and the poor, etc.

Box 1. Examples of community management of RWS in India

- The GTZ-supported (German Agency for Technical Co-operation) *Aapni Yojana* in Churu, Rajasthan, innovated by charging users of public water points.
- Private water societies of Ollavanna in Kerala use interest income from contributions to finance major repairs and system extensions.
- The multi-village piped water system in Kholapur, Maharashtra, has generated substantial profits over 20 years of operation.

Scaling up for sustainability and quality

Swajaldhara is a huge step towards scaling up effective and sustainable community management of water supply in India. But the greater tasks of improving quality and sustainability lie ahead, requiring a different kind of effort. The challenge now is to address new dimensions of scaling up.

References

1 World Bank (1999) *Rural Water Supply and Sanitation*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers.
2 See www.dws.nic.in/data/Swajal/sw-guidelines.htm
3 *Down to Earth*, editorial, 15 July 2004.
4 See Ramamohan Rao, M.S., C.H. Batchelor, A.J. James, R. Nagaraja, J. Seeley and J.A. Butterworth (eds.) (2003) 'Andhra Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Programme Water Resources Audit: Phase I Report', Andhra Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Programme and DFID India, and www.nri.org/whirl.

About the author

A.J. James is an Environmental and Natural Resource Economist and Director of Pragmatix Research and Advisory Services, India.