

FOSTERING COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP IN RURAL WATER SUPPLY SYSTEMS

Insights from Ganjam, Odisha

While the Jal Jeevan Mission aims to provide functional household tap connections (FHTC) to every rural household in India by 2024, managing the drinking water delivery system through community ownership poses a significant challenge. Our observations from Ganjam illustrate the success of community ownership, and, in turn, its management relies on ensuring that households clearly recognise the costs, benefits, and risks associated with the system.

Case studies on schemes in Ganjam district serve as a clear example of how remote habitats have taken ownership of drinking water systems with the help of Gram Vikas, a not-for-profit organisation. Gram Vikas ensures community ownership and management of drinking water delivery systems through a behavioural change approach focusing on demand generation. By examining the case of five habitats in Ganjam district (Mitrapur, Jyotinagar, Khajurisahi, Kamapalli, Kumarabegapalli) supported by Gram Vikas, the study presents an account of the sustainability of water systems under the following heads -



Creating demand for water supply services helps build ownership of rural water supply systems by ensuring that the community actively participates in decision-making processes and takes responsibility for the system's operations and maintenance. By communicating the benefits of having a tap water connection, such as improvements in health, education, time, energy, and social status, the community becomes more invested in the system. Additionally, conveying that local ownership will make the water utility more efficient and sustainable encourages community members to take ownership of the system.

source, operational, financial, and institutional. We find that demand creation should be a prerequisite for initiating infrastructure development.

FINDINGS

Operational Sustainability

Water quality poses a concern across all five villages, with test results from samples indicating the presence of pathogenic contamination. While this issue hasn't escalated into a critical threat, it's imperative to take action to treat the water adequately.

Source Sustainability

While there are no imminent risks to water sources, it is necessary to safeguard them against human and animal contamination. Care needs to be taken in the future extent of groundwater extraction.

Institutional Sustainability

Gram Vikas intervention has facilitated the dissemination of the advantages of accessing tap water connections and emphasised the importance of collective ownership of such a system.

Financial Sustainability

Even though water charges have been determined, they are not uniform. While the charges cover the O&M costs, the full cost is yet to be recovered to ensure sustainability.

Community Ownership

One of the key observations from the Ganjam case study is the significance of community ownership in achieving sustainability of rural water supply systems. We find that waiting for the consent of all households before initiating project work makes the system demand-based rather than supply-driven. Involving the local community in preparing village action plans and obtaining approval for project reports further strengthens their ownership leading to effective functioning.

Policy Recommendations

- Preventing contamination, promoting responsible water usage, raising awareness through education, and collaborating closely with local authorities are essential to ensure source sustainability.
- Detailed knowledge about computing the complete water delivery cost needs to be imparted among VWSC members. Such knowledge enhances innovative ways of pricing water charges. Some villagers have managed to maintain low water charges by handling operational tasks through voluntary labour (shramadaan).
- The VWSC may collect O&M charges in the initial stages and attempt to recover the full cost later. Establishing a corpus fund for water charges collected over and above the O&M charges will help cover other costs like equipment repair and replacement.
- Villagers who exhaust their 100 days of work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) may be granted an additional 5-10 days to earn money for paying water charges. These extra days could also be utilised for activities to enhance source sustainability and prevent contamination of water bodies.
- The state government may introduce a wage rate policy for individuals employed as watermen/water-women by VWSCs. This policy could be based on the number of households served, with slabs created for proportional payments.
- The full cost of water delivery may be estimated even at the stage of preparing the Detailed Project Report (DPR) to understand the cost of alternative infrastructure facilities. This will promote choosing cost-effective infrastructure solutions.

- Maintaining water quality is a challenging task for the VWSC. So, it is essential to undertake regular chlorination and testing. A proper testing regime must be established, and adequate training must be given to implementing these practices.
- It is also crucial for the community to prioritize protecting water sources and ensuring proper waste disposal practices to enhance water quality.
- The VWSC could engage local educational institutions to ensure water sources' sustainability and conduct regular water quality testing.
- The government should establish a comprehensive support system to aid VWSCs with ongoing needs related to sourcing, technical expertise, operational efficiency, and financial management at the block, district and state levels. Continuous training and technical support are required to account for the change of committee members and promote lateral learning.
- In order to make the water supply system demand-driven, intensive IEC activities need to be conducted as a prerequisite for the different phases of JJM implementation. Getting the consent of all households is also required to create ownership.
- The government can incentivise VWSCs by providing matching grants to cover the deficit between the total cost of the water supply and the revenue collected above operational expenses, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the water supply system.
- The government may provide solar pumps in areas where dug wells, or shallow tube wells are utilised. This helps reduce operational costs and mitigate the uncertainty of electricity availability.
- Training is also required to create awareness of the volumetric water charging method and encourage judicious water use.
- VWSCs must conduct regular meetings and record the minutes. The VWSC should institute grievance redressal mechanisms to address the concerns of the community in a timely manner.