

Rights-based approach in India

Background

A rights-based approach (RBA) helps WaterAid analyse the issues around unequal power relations that prevent people having access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).¹ Our 2015–2020 Global Strategy emphasises rights and the use of RBA.

From 2013–2016 WaterAid made a systematic effort to adopt the RBA through the Rights-Based Approach Action Learning Initiative. The aim of this cross-regional initiative was to support WaterAid staff to identify and apply the principles and aspirations of RBA into programmes, and build teams' confidence in moving from a needs-based approach to an RBA. The intent is to scale up use of RBA to build the voices of communities and hold duty bearers to account. This case study considers how WaterAid India increases capacity for collective action, using an RBA.

WaterAid India views increasing capacity as the ability to design and structure operating mechanisms that allow a shift from a 'delivery approach' to an RBA that addresses inequalities in WASH. The WaterAid India team recognises the need to strengthen its own capacity and those of other stakeholders, i.e. partners, governments and the people, to recognise the merits and adopt this approach.

Involvement in the RBA Learning Initiative has allowed WaterAid India to embed the learning, particularly the importance of changing attitudes towards what sustainability in WASH represents (i.e. a focus on sector strengthening, district-wide approaches) and therefore of how it designs and approaches programming. WaterAid India would like to ensure this understanding spreads to all stakeholders involved.

Combined with this learning, the partnership training gave the WaterAid team more insight. 'Collective action' in WaterAid India programmes now entails a more participatory approach to achieving long-term, national goals. The traditional donor–grantee relationship has gradually been replaced by strategic partnerships with stakeholders at various levels. Through evidence-based analysis, WaterAid India has been able to enhance credibility with stakeholders, especially government, and be recognised as a resource for promoting sustainable WASH programmes, rather than as an implementer in few communities.



¹ WaterAid (2011) Rights-based approaches to increasing access to water and sanitation. Discussion Paper.

National-level context

WaterAid India has experimented with strategic interventions to further sustainable WASH through an RBA. The key achievement has been the establishment of the need for this shift, and the resulting visible commitment to an RBA in organisational priorities, partnerships, strategies, and capabilities. WaterAid India recognises that the process is complex and needs time before any claims can be made of a robust model for an RBA to sustainable WASH.

WaterAid India has invested heavily in building partner capacities to adopt an RBA, and partners have progressed on many fronts. WaterAid India knows the areas of focus for future capacity building efforts which are of priority to civil society actors, and will support them to function more effectively.

With this remit in mind, WaterAid India is committed to empowering partners to:

- Deal more effectively with specific challenges in their regions. This will require more in-depth analysis of local situations, to identify and understand the specific challenges faced by communities, and presenting solutions through successful models for district governments to adopt and upscale.
- Promote improved hygiene behaviour more effectively. Although there is agreement about its importance, not much headway has been made on models that work at scale. The Government is taking steps to address this gap, and will work in collaboration to translate goals for improved hygiene into sustained practice in communities.

Feedback from partners shows that work on thematic issues like the upscaling of Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) and designs for disability have worked well. These are effective demonstration models with tangible results. Strategies that have a good mix of common agendas with the Government and a few thematic focus areas have been successful to ensure the needs of the vulnerable and most marginalised are addressed.

RBA for people with disabilities

In 2010, concerted efforts were made to identify people with disabilities in the communities WaterAid India worked in. However, the Government programmes WaterAid India aligned with did not have a provision for toilets appropriate for people with disabilities. WaterAid India motivated people with disabilities to design their own toilets, incorporating the modifications into the standard model to give them better access – e.g. changing the door, adding a place to rest, adding something to hold on to, etc. There was no formal training for this, and staff reassured households that learning by mistakes was useful.

By trial and error several models emerged, and, in 2013, it became clear that these models needed to be institutionalised and scaled up. It was found to be crucial to compare models by cost and design, and that materials to raise awareness and advocate for the rights of people with disabilities were needed.

The WaterAid India team in Jharkhand relentlessly pursued dialogues with the Government to include a special focus on people with disabilities in the Government's Nirmal Bharat Abhiyaan – or Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) – approach. They requested that the Government released subsidies for toilets on condition that families who had people with disabilities in their home adopted the 'disabled-friendly toilet model'.

WaterAid India also activated and strengthened the District Disability Forum (Jharkhand Vikalanga Manch or JVM). A series of two-day workshops were held, on the importance of WASH in disability, what constitutes addressing special needs for people with disabilities, and how to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. The JVM was encouraged to follow up on issues with the Government and submit a memorandum to the District Collector. A booklet about WASH and disability was also designed.

WaterAid India then organised a state-level workshop with technical support from Water Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC), enabling engineers and sanitation coordinators to interact on a common platform. The Secretary of the Ministry took key decisions, including technical options as an annex to Government guidelines, and sanctioned an additional 3,000–5,000 Indian Rupees (approx. £31.50) for families with members with disabilities. The technical modifications were estimated to increase the cost of construction by only 8–12%, but it was important that the additional funds be released with the toilet subsidy, to allow special features to be incorporated.

WaterAid India presented the design options for people with disabilities to the central Government, but unfortunately no additional resources were available and they were directed back to state level. WaterAid India continued its dialogue and succeeded in bringing about the realisation that disability is an issue that needs to be addressed within central Government programmes and policies.

The Government approached WaterAid India to develop a manual for disability-friendly sanitation solutions, which was launched in November 2015 and is featured on the Government's website. WaterAid India has since been requested to help develop guidelines with other states.

Spotlight: Community action solves incomplete toilet problem

The village of Bori (within the village council or 'Panchayat' of Budni) in the district of Sehore was declared 'Nirmal Gram' or open defecation-free (ODF) in 2012–13. It had been struggling to attain ODF status, largely because of 42 incomplete toilets in the village. The community had lodged complaints through various avenues about the lack of sanitation, with little success. When WaterAid India started working with the community, they heard about the issue. Rather than WaterAid stepping in and completing them, they and the community decided the best approach was to raise further awareness in the community about the importance of completing the toilets, for improved sanitation.

Subsequently, at the request of the youth WASH team, a village meeting was organised with local duty bearers (town and district government officials). The community participated in the meeting and the village secretary was served a 'show-cause' notice. This meant that he was duty-bound to respond to the issue of the incomplete toilets and he gave the community his assurance that the matter would be resolved as a priority.

The community then also raised the issue with the district commissioner during a community interface meeting in the district. As a consequence, the district commissioner contacted the village secretary directly to demand that all toilets be completed within ten days. All 42 toilets were repaired and made functional within two weeks, and Bori was declared ODF shortly after.

Lessons on integrating the RBA

Over the past few years, WaterAid India has taken time to reflect and learn from its work on RBA and sustainability. Critical lessons include:

- Sustainable WASH requires working at scale. This necessitates alignment with national agendas and not working in isolation. WaterAid India and its partners have moved away from being direct implementers in small catchments to promoters of innovations and demonstrations, and building local capacities for replication.
- Jointly collecting real-time data on mutually agreed parameters with stakeholders builds credibility.
- Building credibility and proactively demonstrating commitment to the RBA across stakeholders creates an open environment for partnerships. As a support agency, WaterAid India has systematically invested in the capacity building of partners, government functionaries and community-based civil society groups.

WaterAid India has promoted collective action in an environment of flexibility and willingness to listen to different viewpoints. Civil society groups have been supported and encouraged to lead and participate in decision making.

Study based on focus group discussions by IOD Parc held with WaterAid staff and partners, as part of the UK Department for International Development's Programme Partnership Arrangement final evaluation, 2016.

Photo: WaterAid/ Areeb Hashmi