

## To make the urban water mission work, fix institutional structures

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The government's 2021-22 budget announcement of the Jal Jeevan Mission-Urban (JJM-U), with an outlay of ₹2.87 lakh crore, over five years, rightly addresses the huge gap in water supply and sewage infrastructure in cities. However, it is not enough to deliver long-term water sustainability across urban India. A 2018 NITI Aayog report estimates that, one, by 2030, the urban water deficit will stand at almost half of the projected demand and, two, 21 major cities will run out of groundwater in the immediate future. Water sustainability is vital for resilient and healthy cities. With unprecedented urbanisation projected over the next 30 years, the government must expand its focus from infrastructure provision to the comprehensive management of urban water to ensure sustainable urban growth and enhanced quality of life of millions of city-dwellers.

There are, however, two key barriers. One, our statutory and administrative frameworks, including the National Water Policy 2012 (NWP), do not recognise cities as a unit of planning for integrated water management even though cities continue to be the biggest consumers of water and the biggest contributors of pollution in a watershed. The current hydrology-based basin-level approach misses a critical element of urban governance that is directly linked to municipal jurisdictions, mandates, and organisational structures. Two, over time, we have compartmentalised water into distinct entities (potable water, groundwater, stormwater, ponds and lakes) — each with distinct custodians (if at all) and distinct planning and management objectives. Moreover, integrated planning and management of water (including natural water resources) do not feature as a mandate in the municipal Acts. As a result, departmental priorities, targets, and budgetary provisions for the same do not exist.

JJM-U provides a unique opportunity to remedy this through strategic enabling statutory, administrative, and institutional reforms coordinated across scales — national, state, and city. A national-level mandate for Integrated Urban Water Management (IUWM) in cities is necessary. IUWM is a globally accepted approach that integrates the elements of the urban water cycle — source management, water supply, sanitation, stormwater management, sewage treatment and its reuse, solid waste management — with the city's urban development to maximise economic, social, and environmental benefits in an equitable manner (World Bank 2012).

For this, NWP, currently under review, must emphasise the need for IUWM at the city level. Although NWP recommends devolution of authority to the lower tiers of government, it does not set out how. The revised NWP must also stress the need for preparing city Water Master Plans as a key planning tool and statutory mechanism for implementation of IUWM and its integration with city planning processes.

JJM-U must also incentivise the preparation of WMPs by making this a pre-condition for cities seeking financial assistance under the scheme. The right institutional mechanism is equally essential. An Integrated Urban Water Management Authority (IUWMA) should be created under the state water resources department in all million-plus cities with representation from all city agencies and stakeholders to facilitate more coordinated planning and implementation of sustainable urban water management. IUWMA should be backed by legislation and a model Act should be prepared to assist this process. In smaller cities, an integrated urban water management department should be created within municipal corporations/municipalities.

Necessary amendments to the municipal Act should be made to add IUWM to the list of existing municipal functions. To ensure efficacy, WMPs need adopting as a statutory document at the city level and integrated with the city development plans/city master plans. The JJMU must create the enabling framework for IUWM, moving a step closer to creating cities that are resilient and healthy.

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