

How to leverage trained water professionals

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Water is a key sector to overcome public health, livelihood and climate crisis-related challenges. To create lasting water security, the State has to actively engage with empowered local communities and innovative markets to enable the improved flexibility, adaptation and resilience that the sector demands.



Water projects can be imagined at any scale, but contextual, local responses remain critical. For example, even if you planned to bring water from a faraway river to a city, you would need to understand how that new water will be used, design for excess flow and for sewage to be carried away.

For this, you need trained professionals, local leaders and citizen volunteers who understand how local water behaves, both above and below the ground. They must be able to find granular solutions that accommodate upstream and downstream solutions created by others.

Over the decades, successive governments have become more and more ambitious about scaling up water infrastructure. The ministry of jal shakti (MoJS) has budgeted ₹30,000 crore for water-related works in this year alone. And the Jal Jeevan Mission hopes to cover all the 145 million unreached rural households with Functional Household Tap Connections (FHTC) by 2024. The Atal Bhujal Yojana aims to improve groundwater management in 8,353 gram panchayats in five years.

Tens of thousands of people across the country have been trained for such programmes. Across the country, they may be called *bhujal jankars*, *dhara sevaks*, or *jal surakshaks*. This excludes all the *rojgar sahayaks*, *krishi mitras* and *swachhata doots* who work in allied areas.

Yet, if we had to map where all these trained people are, we would be in a fix. Nobody has a comprehensive idea of how effective the training has been either. What has been the impact on the livelihoods of these trainees? How has the knowledge transferred taken root in communities for ongoing problem-solving? There is no system to understand the latent, dispersed knowledge about water. There is a societal memory loss.

These millions of skilled workers are hard to discover, but even if we could find them, there would be little trust in their prior knowledge and experience. So each training effort starts afresh, rarely building on the foundations that exist.

How can we change this?

What if we could “light up” all the people who have already undergone training in a way that programme leaders and also communities know who and where they are; what they already know; and what they have already done? Everybody would then have the ability to seek out exactly the people they need. Equally, trained practitioners would have the agency to access this information for their own purposes.

Such discoverable, certifiable water leaders could be critical to create verifiable impact at scale in any water initiative. If done right, we believe that this can contribute to half a million jobs across the country.

As we make skilled people more visible, what if we also digitally map and attest resources that they engage with, use and produce? There could be electronic registries of master trainers, teaching modules, water security plans, and water assets such as wells and farm ponds. Capacity-building budgets could then be redirected to fill only the gaps in training. The money saved could be used to pay for services delivered. This would incentivise people to remain in the sector, and both receive and provide value across time.

Arghyam has recently funded the deployment of one simple digital attestation service, to begin with, in a few large programmes being implemented in some states together with non-governmental organisations. The pandemic has forced some physical training to go virtual. Interestingly, people are now experiencing the convenience of anytime, anywhere, atomised learning sessions with expert trainers. Through this process, the trainees receive a digital attestation that they can own, access and share to leverage new opportunities. Our efforts are aligned with the tech design and the principles behind capacity-building platforms adopted by the government such as Diksha, ECHO and iGot.

The early results are promising. Open data sets and a shared digital infrastructure can be very powerful in restoring the agency of *samaaj* through community institutions, of *sarkaar* through local government, and of *bazaar* through new livelihoods for skilled workers.

If we have to effectively tackle the current and future pandemics, and collectively address climate-related emergencies, flexibility, adaptation and resilience are not just words. They are critical skills that communities must build quickly. The water sector is a good place to innovate in service of this imperative.
