

Dialogue on Pathways and Potentials to Address Arsenic Challenge in Assam



25th May, 2018
WSSO, Guwahati

SaciWATERs, Hyderabad organised a one day *Dialogue on the pathways and potentials to address arsenic challenge in Assam* at Water and Sanitation Support Organisation (WSSO), Betkuchi, Guwahati on 25th May, 2018. The dialogue was the first among the series of regional dialogues to be held as a part of the overall initiative of water quality supported by European Union (EU) for a project called '*Civil society voices, vulnerable communities and localised platforms for water quality challenges*'. The project, through the approach of building and empowering people-centric platforms at the district level catering from 10 (pilot) to 50(launch) to 150(expand) affected habitations and simultaneously enabling gradual withdrawal of the implementing organisations, aims to complement the National Water Quality Sub-Mission (NWQSM) under the National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) for providing/enabling/improving access to safe drinking water for marginalised and vulnerable communities in arsenic and fluoride affected regions. The geographic focus of project, led by INREM Foundation, Anand (Gujarat) in partnership with SaciWATERs is limited to the chosen 8 arsenic and fluoride affected districts spread across 6 states in India viz, Bihar, Assam, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Telangana and Odisha. The time span of the project is 4 year in line with the duration of NWQSM.

In Assam, the districts chosen for action are Jorhat and Nalbari. Within the state, SaciWATERs has been working on the issue of arsenic contamination in water since 2013 through partnerships and collaboration with individuals and organisations under Arsenic Knowledge and Action Network (AKAN) and more recently through platforms like Safe Water Centre for Healthy Assam (SWaCHa) supported by Arghyam Foundation, Bengaluru in partnership with INREM. The received support from EU would hence build on the existing efforts of the network and the platform in the region.

The main focus of the first regional dialogue was to share about the components of the EU supported action in Jorhat and Nalbari districts so as to (i) receive suggestions on strategies for the selection of 10 habitations for the pilot stage of the project (2) find pathways to build government level collaboration and (3) leverage opportunities for co-financing the EU supported action. In finding pathways to build the government level collaboration, the dialogue was also about understanding government programmes on safe water and experiences of CSOs working in the region. Participants in the dialogue spanned across academia, government and civil society.

The day began with a round of introduction of the participants followed by the presentation on "*Civil society voices, vulnerable communities and localised platforms for addressing water quality challenges*" delivered by Manish Maskara from SaciWATERs. The presentation highlighted the aims, objectives, expected outcomes, strategy of people centric district platforms and linkages with govt programmes/mission on safe water/health, in particular National Water Quality Sub-Mission (NWQSM). One thread of the discussion that followed comprised of reviving the defunct water users committee so as to build capacity of existing institutions, bridging the divide between health and water departments, sharing of policy level challenges in addressing the arsenic issue and related health manifestations. The other thread of discussion revolved around the reasons for the variation in water contamination data for Jorhat and Nalbari districts over the last 8-10 years, citing gaps in sample collections, policy level and field level interventions, awareness generation as some of the reasons.

Following the introduction and initial discussions, the next discussion focussed on the strategies and methods for the selection of 10 habitations in the pilot stage of the project.

Selection of 10 habitations in the districts

The purpose of the session was to discuss about the strategies/ methods for selecting the 10 habitations in Jorhat and Nalbari in Assam in such a way that both the scaling up of habitations and gradual withdrawal by SaciWATERs happens smoothly. The discussion was led by Dr R. L. Goswami, CSIR-NEIST; Dr. Abhinandan Saikia, TISS; Dr. Mamata Adhikari, Cotton College and Mr. Hridip Ranjan Saikia, Tezpur University. The strategies that came out were (i) selection of habitations affected with arsenic after gathering data from different sources (PHED/CGWB/academic research), (ii) selection of regions considering environmental and cultural perspectives of the community along with the land use pattern, (iii) considering arsenic hotspots and nearby areas for cumulative impact (iv) to look at cancer related data from particular arsenic affected regions (v) considering habitations where solutions have been implemented by the government or CSOs and (vi) to understand people's willingness to respond to the issue so as to allow organic scaling up of habitations. However, validation of the existing data also came out as a strong point.

Pathways for collaboration with the government

The session mainly focused on finding pathways to build government level collaboration under the EU supported action. The session was led by Er. A B Paul; Dr. Manigreeva Krishnatreya, B.Boorah Cancer Institute; and the officials from Health department, Nalbari. The discussion highlighted about the submission of proposal for Arsenic Mitigation Support Centre (AMSC) to the PHED, Assam apart from focussing on the importance of convergence and knowledge building among various departments like PHED, Health, Agriculture, Forest, Irrigation, Social Welfare, Education, PRI etc. One of the participants also stated about Joint Memorandum which could be submitted to the concern department to reduce the duplicacy of the work and to focus on their assigned role and responsibilities to address the issues of arsenic collectively. From Health Department, it was highlighted that there were no health programmes/schemes pertaining to health manifestations of arsenic and hence safe drinking water could be the immediate solution. However, only providing the safe drinking water, be it free or otherwise wouldn't be able to address the issues until and unless community participation in the initial stage is looked into, for which there is tremendous scope under the EU supported action. Manish also pointed out, based on the field experience in Bihar, that the community may not be able to distinguish between domestic water and drinking water and hence requires a different approach so as to complement the government programmes on enabling access to safe drinking water.

Co-financing the action

The focus of this discussion was to leverage opportunities for co-financing and the discussion was led by the representatives from CSOs, NGOs. The session largely highlighted, to begin with, the scope of the action which includes opportunities for fellowships, research study, collaboration with existing projects and later highlighted about the requisites of the co-funding to be met by external organisations which was to the tune of 22%. The presentation also brought the example of UNICEF which had recently become a partner to the project in the fluoride affected district in Rajasthan

Towards the end, SaciWATERs offered vote of thanks to all the participants, government departments, NGOs, CSOs, academic institutions. The kind support and cooperation extended by WSSO in hosting the dialogue was also duly acknowledged.

List of Participants

| Name | Organisation |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Dr R L Goswami | SIE-NEIST, Jorhat |
| Jitumoni Kalita | Gramya Vikas Mancha |
| Er A B Paul | Safe Water Centre for Healthy Assam |
| Dr. Manigreeva Krishnatreya | Dr. BB Cancer Institute, Guwahati |
| Anmona Haudique | ICCO, Guwahati |
| Biraj Baruah | DLL, Nalbari |
| Ramar Rajboagshi | DLL, Nalbari |
| Nilutpal Das | Arsenic Knowledge and Action Network |
| Pranob Jyoti Borah | WSSO, Assam |
| Meghali Barma | WSSO, Assam |
| Hridip Ranjan Sharma | Tezpur University |
| Dr. Nalini K Barma | Health, SDM&HO, Nalbari |
| Dr. A Saikia | TISS, Guwahati |
| Dr. Mamata Goswami | Cotton University |
| Jasmeet Singh | ICCO |
| Kaushik M | PHED |
| Partha B Baruah | WSSO, PHED |
| P. Das | Independent |
| Nayan Moni Kalita | PHED |
| Sadanand Daimary | WSSO, PHED |
| Debojit Chakraborty | WSSO, PHED |
| Ranjit Bano | WSSO, PHED |
| N. Talukdar | WSSO, PHED |
| Naren Bara | WSSO, PHED |
| Dipu Saikia | WSSO, PHED |
| Manish Maskara | SaciWATERs |
| Churamoni Saikia | SaciWATERs |
| Mousumi Sinha | SaciWATERs |
| Atikur Jaman | Safe Water Centre for Healthy Assam |
| Surajit Deka | Safe Water Centre for Healthy Assam |