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A decentralized, community-driven approach

According to official Indian government documents, the sanitation policy of the Indian government is focused on decentralized solutions, rather than piped sewerage and centralized treatment. Current urban sanitation policy, as embodied in the National Urban Sanitation Plan of 2008, remains focused on decentralized approaches. The plan also prioritizes rehabilitation and increased usage of existing sanitation infrastructure networks over new infrastructure construction.

While government policy documents may not tell the whole story, research revealed no evidence of a change in official policy or evidence suggesting that government sanitation programs conflict with official policy. The methodology included Google, Lexis-Nexis, and University of Washington Library searches, searches of two major Indian newspapers, and searches of websites and blogs sponsored by non-governmental organizations. Sources included the India Sanitation Portal, a forum on sanitation in India used by governmental and non-governmental organizations, and WASH Sanitation Updates, a sanitation news feed with considerable material on India. More information on research methods and sources can be found in the “Sources and Methods” section below.

Urban and Rural Sanitation: Official Government Policy

Water supply and sanitation is the responsibility of sub-national state governments under the Indian Constitution.¹ At present, the national government sets water supply and sanitation policy. States plan, design and execute water supply schemes accordingly through their departments of public health engineering or rural development engineering, or their state-level water boards. While state governments are in charge of operation and maintenance, they may pass the responsibility to village or district-level *panchayats* in rural areas, called Panchayat Raj Institutions (PRIs) or to municipal governing bodies in urban areas, called Urban Local Bodies (ULBs). Given the highly decentralized provision of water and sanitation services, there is no autonomous regulatory agency for the water supply and sanitation sector in India at the state or national level.

National rural and urban sanitation policies are developed independently and are managed by different government departments. The Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation (DDWS), which is part of the Ministry of Rural Development, is the national body responsible for rural sanitation policy and programs. The Ministry of Urban Development and Growth is the national body responsible for urban sanitation policy. The Ministries formulate policies and establish programs to support their implementation, including monitoring of state-level programs. Recent policy documents produced by these ministries emphasize a decentralized approach to sanitation in both rural and urban contexts that empowers state and local governments to create and carry out water supply and sanitation plans. This memo focuses on India’s urban sanitation policy.

NOTE: The findings and conclusions contained within this material are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Urban Sanitation: The National Urban Sanitation Policy

The Indian government's most recent policy document on urban sanitation is the 2008 National Urban Sanitation Policy (NUSP). This policy, produced by the Ministry of Urban Development, does not attempt to provide a sanitation solution for all of India. Instead, it emphasizes a decentralized approach to policy specifics and implementation, calling on individual states and cities to prepare their own sanitation strategies and plans in conformity with the policy.² NUSP guidelines specify that the process for preparing these strategies should be consultative and participatory.³ The NUSP is ambiguous regarding new infrastructure because it leaves implementation strategies to states and cities.

The NUSP emphasizes community-driven solutions. The overall sanitation goal is to “transform Urban India into community- driven, totally sanitized, healthy and liveable cities and towns.”⁴ The NUSP outlines sub-goals that work towards the overall goal. These are:

- Increase awareness regarding links between sanitation and public and environmental health issues;
- Change behaviors to adopt health sanitation practices;
- Achieve open defecation free cities;
- Promote integrated city-wide sanitation:
 - Strengthen institutions and mainstream sanitation, including increasing access for urban poor;
 - Safe and sanitary disposal of human waste: promote proper functioning of network-based systems; recycle and reuse treated wastewater;
 - Promote proper operation and maintenance of sanitation facilities, including the connection of households to sewerage systems “wherever possible.”⁵

Since NUSP leaves the choice of technology for policy implementation to the states and cities, the policy does not weigh in specifically on the relative importance of centralized, piped sanitation solutions vs. decentralized smaller systems. However the NUSP does caution states and cities against overly ambitious infrastructure goals, emphasizing that technology is only a means, not an end. The NUSP also emphasizes that long-term sustainability, as well as operations and management for infrastructure need to be kept in mind when choosing among technology options. The NUSP recognizes that reconditioning or laying new sewers is resource intense and that technologies need to be incremental.⁶ The policy also recommends the use of interim solutions that are more feasible even where high-infrastructure solutions like sewerage would be ideal.⁷ Finally, the NUSP states that financing help from the national government will focus on “improving the efficiency of existing sanitation infrastructure and service delivery,” rather than new construction.⁸

Other government funding priorities reflect increased emphasis on management efficiency. The NUSP prioritizes investment in institutional development. This includes technology and management capacity building, monitoring and evaluation, and coordination among institutions.⁹

The NUSP also calls for a special emphasis on urban poor and women.¹⁰ It states that the poor should be provided with a “minimum” level of sanitation, although there is no discussion of what is considered minimal. It further specifies that 20% of sanitation funding should be earmarked for providing sanitation solutions to the urban poor.¹¹

The NUSP does not discuss the promotion of power generation from waste products. Online sources discuss the enormous energy potential of these programs, and indicate that some cities may have programs that turn waste into power. However, the research found no discussion of this as a priority at the national level.^{12,13}

Apart from the calls for feasible systems in the NUSP, there is little discussion on how much water, power and money the country needs to achieve its goals, or whether it has enough.

Policy in Practice: Does Implementation differ from Policy?

The question that remains is whether sanitation policy has changed since these documents were published, or whether the Indian government's sanitation programs are in fact different from its policy.

The NUSP was published in 2008. NGO websites and sanitation blogs make no mention of a policy change since. The Water Supply and Sanitation Council website provides a history of Indian sanitation policy in which it cites the NUSP as the most recent urban sanitation policy document.¹⁴

Practice does not seem to stray from official policy, but this is difficult to assess via on-line resources. The research found no strong source on how well policy and practice align and our conclusions are therefore based primarily on the lack of any evidence that programs differ from the published official policy.

The available evidence suggests that government practice does align with policy. Several sites list government and NGO sanitation programs that focus nearly exclusively on promoting ground-level solutions (see "Sources and Methods" for more detail). While some of these are clearly not community-driven, nearly all focus on community-level programs. For example, one initiative provided water filters to schools that did not have a source of water.¹⁵

News stories about infrastructure, from *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*, mainly reported projects that enhance the capacity of existing systems. There was little editorial discussion of sanitation policy or its implementation. However, there do appear to be some critics of India's policy that emphasize the need for private-public partnerships. David Mulford, US Ambassador to India at the time, wrote an opinion piece in *The Hindu* stating that government at all levels needed to work with the private sector in order to adequately provide sanitation services.¹⁶ Further critiques in *India Together* highlighted the slow pace of water and sanitation improvements, attributing it to the government's scattered policies.¹⁷

Finally, while the World Bank's projects and reports emphasize infrastructure, their Country Water Strategy for India emphasizes a decentralized approach with investment in infrastructure as only one component of a WATSAN strategy that is participatory, transparent, and community-based.¹⁸

However, because the NUSP does leave urban sanitation policy implementation to states and cities, it is possible that some states have adopted sanitation strategies that promote piped sewerage and centralized treatment. This seems unlikely, given that the NUSP clearly states that the national government will not prioritize centralized projects for funding. However, World Bank policy on Indian sanitation indicates that it would be amenable to funding such projects. This research was limited to national government policy, and does not explore states' sanitation priorities.

News and Web Coverage

Lack of significant discussion about India's sanitation policy online or in the Indian news media contributed to the difficulty of drawing concrete conclusions on the current state of policy. In addition, little scholarly work focuses on urban sanitation policy in India. The majority of the scholarly work focuses on case studies of specific sanitation projects. Current news coverage of sanitation issues focuses on manual scavenging¹⁹ and a new system of rating cities in their progress towards the NUSP goals.²⁰

Sources and Methods

Google Search

Searched: India(n) sewerage, India(n) sanitation policy, Indian(n) piped sewerage, watsan NGOs India, sanitation NGO India, piped sewerage India, India sanitation opinion, India sanitation editorial, India sewers opinion and combinations thereof. Accessed 19 November 2010 through 10 December 2010.

News Searches

Lexis-Nexis. Searched: India sanitation policy, India sanitation policy urban, India sanitation program. Found several articles, all on community-based and decentralized programs. Accessed 27 Nov 2010.

- Found one 2003 article from *The Statesman of India* reporting a centralized approach for a plan to regulate urban growth and provide social infrastructure for 2025.

The Hindu, www.hindu.com Searched: sewer, sanitation, sanitation policy.

The Times of India, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com> Searched: sewer, sanitation, sanitation policy.

Government Websites

Ministry of Rural Development, Department of Drinking Water and Supply. www.ddws.nic.in, accessed 19-29 November 2010

- Total Sanitation Campaign, www.ddws.nic.in/tsc_index.htm. Accessed 25 November 2010

Ministry of Urban Development, <http://www.urbanindia.nic.in>, accessed 19-29 November 2010

Non-governmental Sector Websites

Water Supply and Sanitation Council, www.wsscc.org.

- Has an excellent page on the recent history of water and sanitation policies in India at <http://www.wsscc.org/countries/asia/india/wash-sector-glance>

India Sanitation Portal, www.indiansanitationportal.org. Started by the IRC as a place to share information. Used by Water Aid, WASH Institute, the Water and Sanitation Program, the Indian government and others. Publishes sanitation news, including updates on publications and government papers about sanitation in India.

India Water Portal, www.indiawaterportal.org

India Energy Portal, www.indiaenergyportal.org

India Environment Portal, www.indiaenvironmentportal.org

WASH Sanitation Updates blog, www.sanitationupdates.wordpress.com. News feed on Sanitation maintained by the [IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre](http://www.irc.nl) (www.irc.nl) and by USAID's [Environmental Health](http://www.ehproject.org) knowledge management activity (www.ehproject.org) and the [Hygiene Improvement Project](http://www.hip.watsan.net) (www.hip.watsan.net)

- All news items on sanitation initiatives in India were community-level projects, including sanitation facilities in schools, sanitation education, city sanitation ratings, eradication of manual scavenging, and establishment of women's savings groups for sanitation.

Water and Sanitation Program, www.wsp.org

Water Centric, www.watercentric.org

Water.org, www.water.org

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- Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India (2010). National Urban Sanitation Policy: Towards City Wide Sanitation.
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¹ Information in this section draws from the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, <http://www.wsscc.org/countries/asia/india/wash-sector-glance>

² Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India (2008). National Urban Sanitation Policy, accessed 20 November 2010, www.urbanindia.nic.in/programme/uwss/slb/SubNUSP.htm

³ Ibid., p. 17

⁴ Ibid., p. 7

⁵ Ibid., p. 8

⁶ Ibid. p 16

⁷ Ibid., p. 12

⁸ Ibid., p. 12

⁹ Ibid., p. 9

¹⁰ Ibid., -3

¹¹ India Water Portal, accessed 9 December 2010, www.indiawaterportal.org

¹² India Energy Portal, accessed 9 December 2010, http://www.indiaenergyportal.org/subthemes_link.php?text=wastetoenergy&themeid=6

¹³ India Energy Portal, accessed 9 December 2010, www.indiaenergyportal.org/view_allNews.php

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- ¹⁴ Water Supply and Sanitation Council, accessed 19 November 2010 www.wsscc.org/countries/asia/india/wash-sector-glance
- ¹⁵ WASH Sanitation Updates, accessed 28 November 2010, sanitationupdates.wordpress.com/2010/05/12/india-rating-of-cities-under-the-national-urban-sanitation-policy
- ¹⁶ Mulford (2006). India's Water and Sanitation Challenges
- ¹⁷ D'Monte (2007). Taking Stock of WatSan.
- ¹⁸ Briscoe, John and Malik, R.P.S. (2006). Water Economy: Bracing for a Turbulent Future. India's World Bank Water Strategy Paper. web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTWAT/0,,contentMDK:21870256~menuPK:4796187~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:4602123,00.html, accessed 28 Nov 2010.
- ¹⁹ India Sanitation Portal, accessed 9 December 2010, <http://www.indiasanitationportal.org/news>
- ²⁰ Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India (2010). National Urban Sanitation Plan: Towards City Wide Sanitation.