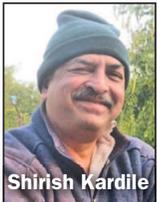


From the Board

Many Small Water Supply Schemes Need Greater Support



The capacity of most small water supply schemes, which predominantly exist in India's rural and semiurban areas, is less than 5 mld. Most of these schemes use surface water as a source, and usually they double-pump their water, meaning raw and pure water require pumping.

Until about 10 years ago, Maharashtra Jeevan Pradhikaran, the state's water supply and sanitation department, oversaw these schemes in Maharashtra. The Maharashtra government then decided to decentralize its water supply schemes to help make them self-sustaining and bring a sense of ownership to local bodies and small communities. Thus, construction, operation, and maintenance were handed over to local bodies and utilities, and much of the capital cost for these schemes was provided by central or state government authorities.

Local bodies collect revenue from consumers by levying a drinking water tax. In rural communities, access per household ranges from Rs 600 to Rs 1200 (USD 10 to 20) per year, depending on a community's socioeconomic status. Only about half of the households pay the taxes regularly, although there are some areas in which up to 80 percent collection is recorded. However, for almost all the schemes, revenues never match expenditures, primarily because of the high cost associated with double pumping. (Government policy states that only "permanently assured sources" are to be tapped, regardless of how near or close they are to a community.)

Naturally, local bodies or utili-

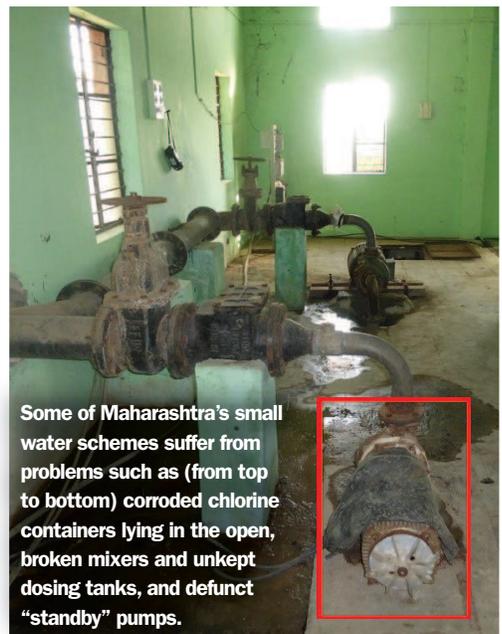
ties must divert funds toward water supply from other revenue sources. As a result, local administrators start cutting corners—often irrationally. Some utilities don't use these water sources and schemes for several months during monsoon and post-monsoon, as local groundwater sources are replenished with rain water (e.g., via dug wells and tube wells). For these reasons and more, many schemes are always under a severe cash crunch.

Treatment plants are also affected, as they can't afford the salaries of skilled operators and employees or equipment maintenance. In many places, "standby" pumps are defunct. Moreover, treatment plant chemicals are always in short supply, and their quality is often compromised. Despite government efforts to adopt simple, nonmechanical, standardized technology for treatment, it's difficult to maintain many schemes in such circumstances.

All these issues, and many more minor but relevant ones, make it difficult to provide the masses with safe, potable water. The Maharashtra government's decision to decentralize its water supply schemes is logical and relevant in many cases. However, considering the ground reality of many rural areas, small-capacity schemes need some kind of state assistance, aid, or subsidy in the immediate future if they're to be sustainable and viable.

—Shirish Kardile,
AWWAIndia Strategic Board Chair

Author's Note: Many small schemes (about 65 percent) are being operated satisfactorily. This column is about the rest.



Some of Maharashtra's small water schemes suffer from problems such as (from top to bottom) corroded chlorine containers lying in the open, broken mixers and unkept dosing tanks, and defunct "standby" pumps.