

Dialogue on Pathways and Potentials to Address Arsenic Challenge in Bihar



7th May, 2018
Bihar State Pollution Control Board, Patna

SaciWATERS, Hyderabad organised a one day *Dialogue on the pathways and potentials to address arsenic challenge in Bihar* at Bihar State Pollution Control Board, Patna on 7th 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 Bihar, the districts chosen for action are Buxar and Bhagalpur. Within the state, SaciWATERS has been working on the issue of arsenic contamination in water since 2013 through partnerships and collaborations with individuals and organisations under Arsenic Knowledge and Action Network (AKAN) supported by Arghyam Foundation. The received support from EU would hence build on the existing efforts of the network in the region.

The main focus of the first regional dialogue was to share about the components of the EU supported action in Buxar and Bhagalpur 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, market 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 highlighting how protein deficiency increases the susceptibility of arsenic contamination in human body therefore nutritional habits of community needs to be altered. The other thread of discussion revolved around the approaches to mitigate the global phenomenon of arsenic contamination and how to make safe water available, affordable and acceptable by the community.

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 Buxar and Bhagalpur in Bihar in such a way that both the scaling up of habitations and gradual withdrawal by SaciWATERS happens smoothly. The session was led by Dr Sucharita Sen, SaciWATERS; Dr Kunal Kanti Majumdar, KPC Medical College and Dr Arun Kumar, Mahavir Cancer Research Sansthan and Training Centre. Out of the discussion, the parameters for the selection of habitations that came out were (i) extent of arsenic contamination based on available data from PHED/CGWB (ii) visible health manifestations (iii) people's sensitivity, willingness and existing capacity to respond to the issue (iv) existing work/efforts of govt./CSO/ research organization in the region (v) Proximity of the habitations keeping in mind the available resources and (vi) socio-economic condition and gendered characteristics.

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 Dr Ragini Mishra, State Health Society; Dr Ashok Ghosh, Bihar State Pollution Control Board; Pankaj Kumar, Water Aid and Jay Prakash, Aga Khan Rural Support Programme. Dr Ragini Mishra described various initiatives taken by the state government under Integrated Disease Surveillance Program (IDSP) and results of preliminary studies. She mentioned about the possibility of having an MoU with SaciWATERS for the purpose of EU project. Pankaj Kumar provided his inputs on two possible areas to connect, first being capacity enhancement of the communities and second being the provision for safe water through institutionalisation of water implementation and management committees at ward level, for which there is tremendous scope under the EU supported action. Jay Prakash briefed the fact that arsenic being one of the greatest threat for human survival is not included in any of the national programs but only limited up to the state level initiatives. One of the participants highlighted that Central Ground Water Board has planned mitigation interventions in districts like Buxar and Bhagalpur which could be helpful for the project.

In addition to this, Sheetal Jhunjhunwala from DrinkWell Technologies, Kolkata also shared about their technology on arsenic mitigation which was well appreciated. The organization had installed several water ATM machines in the arsenic hit areas of West Bengal and Assam that provide arsenic filtered safe water to the communities..

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 Bihar State Pollution Control Board in hosting the dialogue was also duly acknowledged.

