NOT A DROP TO WASTE

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Distribution of key natural resources - Water Resources incl. Rivers & related issues in world & India

In 2020, according to the Niti Aayog, 21 Indian cities, including Delhi, Chennai and Bengaluru, will run out of groundwater. The Aayog's "Composite Water Management Index" (CWMI), released in June, notes that "Seventy per cent of our water resources are contaminated". Several other reports, including the Central Water Commission's "Water and Water Related Statistics 2019", have thrown light on the poor state of India's groundwater aquifers. The urgency of the <u>Atal Bhujal Yojana</u>, launched by the Union Jal Shakti Ministry last week, can, therefore, hardly be overstated. The groundwater revival scheme ticks quite a few right boxes. It seeks to strengthen the "institutional framework of administering groundwater resources and aims to bring about behavioural changes at the community level for sustainable groundwater resource management". However, the Yojana that will be implemented in seven states — Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh — should only be seen as the first step towards restoring the health of the country's aquifers.

India has had a Groundwater Management and Regulation Scheme since 2013. The Atal Bhujal Yojana will draw on some of the institutions created by this scheme, especially village-level water user associations (WUAs). The Jal Shakti Ministry will have its task cut out. The Niti Aayog's CWMI notes that though "80 per cent states have a regulatory framework to establish such associations, progress on the ground is weak". Less than 50 per cent states involve the WUAs in critical groundwater management decisions like those pertaining to irrigation resources, according to the CWMI. The Atal Bhujal Yojana would do well to follow the Niti Aayog's recommendations for strengthening the financial state of the WUAs, including allowing these bodies to retain a significant portion of irrigation fees.

Groundwater contributes to more than 60 per cent of the country's irrigation resources. Power consumers in the agriculture sector are billed at highly subsidised rates, which several studies have shown accounts for the over-extraction of groundwater. However, there is also a substantial body of work which shows that it is politically imprudent to install electricity meters on farmers' fields. The discourse on groundwater use has to move beyond this binary: Ways must be found to balance the demands of farmers with the imperatives of reviving the country's aquifers. One solution — tried out in parts of Punjab — is to gradually reduce subsidies and offer cash compensation to farmers for every unit of electricity they save. The CWMI report talks of other solutions like persuading farmers to adopt more efficient technologies such as drip irrigation. By emphasising on local-level institutions like the WUAs, the Atal Bhujal Yojana has signaled the Jal Shakti ministry's inclination towards such persuasive solutions.

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