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BEING FREE OF OLD WASTE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

The recently released Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) 2.0 guidelines continue to take forward the aims of the SBM launched in 2014, but add an important dimension focused on solid waste management. This goes beyond the efficient collection and transportation of waste and brings focus on processing all types of waste like plastic, construction and demolition waste, as well as providing budgetary support for remediating old waste disposed in all dumpsites across 4,372 cities in India before March 2023. Its components include source segregation; door-to-door collection of waste; separate transportation of different types of wastes; processing of wet waste, dry waste, and construction and demolition waste.

Urban local bodies (ULBs) in several States had prepared detailed project reports (DPRs) for setting up waste processing systems for wet and dry waste as part of SBM which were approved, but the process of setting up these facilities was delayed due to lack of funding and techno process knowledge, and delayed DPR approvals. This resulted in unprocessed waste being dumped in several sites, which needs to be processed through bioremediation before space can be created for new waste processing plants.

Bioremediation of old waste is the process of dismantling old waste heaps, sieving the material to recover bio earth (enriched soil) and refuse-derived fuel which can be used as heating material in cement kilns. As per the SBM 2.0 guidelines, the total quantity of waste generated by urban areas in India is about 1.32 lakh tonnes daily. This adds up to 4.8 crore tonnes per annum. Of this only about 25% is being processed; the rest is disposed of in landfills every year. Given that the waste dumpsites have been operational since the early 2000s, more than 72 crore tonnes of waste need to be processed. In Karnataka, all the 200-plus municipalities had planned to take up bioremediation over the last two years, but the projects did not kick off due to lack of funds. This is where SBM 2.0 could be an important intervention.

The total funding dedicated for implementation of SBM 2.0 is 1.41 lakh crore of which about 39,837 crore is set aside for solid waste management. This mission commits to providing financial assistance to set up fresh waste processing facilities and bioremediation projects across all the ULBs. Financial assistance to to set up construction and demolition waste processing facilities is limited to a chosen 154 large cities such as Bengaluru, Mysore, Davanagere, Hubli, and Kalaburagi which have a population of over 5 lakh.

The financial assistance committed by the mission varies by State. The commitments made by the Government of India (GoI) for solid waste management projects are as follows: 90% for ULBs in the Northeastern and Himalayan States; 100% for ULBs in Union Territories without legislature; 80% for ULBs in Union Territories with legislature; 25% for other ULBs with more than 10 lakh population; 33% for other ULBs with more than 1 lakh but less than 10 lakh population; 50% for other ULBs with less than 1 lakh population. The remaining project cost will be paid from the 15th Finance Commission grants.

SBM was providing 35% funding from the GoI irrespective of the population size of cities. About 23.3% of the project cost was funded by the State governments and the remaining 41.6% was to be funded by the ULBs. The funding was provided to buy efficient vehicles for door-to-door collection and transportation of waste, provide bins for segregation of waste at source, and set up waste processing facilities. SBM 2.0 allocates funding only to set up waste processing facilities; requests for buying vehicles for collection of waste, issuing bins for source segregation or modernising the collection and transportation system are not in its scope.

Lack of funds was one of the main reasons for the partial success of SBM in solid waste management. Now, since SBM 2.0 is committing to paying a significant portion of the project cost, the ULBs are likely to take up projects by matching the shortfall with their reserved funds, thereby hoping to achieve the GoI target of waste disposal sites being free from old waste by March 2023. Also, the transformation of waste disposal sites to processing sites is likely to produce 72 lakh tonnes of organic compost per annum from 4.8 crore tonnes of waste generated across all ULBs in the country. Organic compost recovered from the wet waste, which is 60% of the total waste, can be used to enrich the soil quality and can meet about 10-12% of the country's fertilizer demand. That will reduce the amount of chemical fertilizer imported and save about 2,600 crore of subsidy paid by the government.

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