

FROM SWACHH TO 'NAL SE JAL'

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Government policies & interventions for development in various Sectors and issues arising out of their design & implementation incl. Housing

Brick by brick: A file photo of a man building a toilet under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan in Gonda, Uttar Pradesh. Rajeev Bhatt/Rajeev Bhatt

With the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan scheduled to officially complete its mission of an open defecation free (ODF) India by October 2, there is uncertainty on what lies ahead for the Centre's flagship sanitation scheme.

Since its launch by the Prime Minister in 2014, the rural component of the mission alone has attracted government spending of about Rs. 1 lakh crore, split between the Centre and States in a 60:40 ratio. Discussions are now being held with the Finance Ministry to work out a potential allocation for the scheme as part of the new government's first budget to be presented on July 5.

While government officials and funding agencies alike stress the importance of a second phase past October, with continued behaviour change and solid and liquid waste management programmes required to maintain the scheme's gains, it is unclear if funding and attention could be sustained at levels matching those of the high-profile first phase.

UNICEF study

On Wednesday, Gajendra Singh Shekhawat, Minister of the newly created Jal Shakti Ministry, which is expected to absorb the Drinking Water and Sanitation Ministry, released a UNICEF study showing that groundwater is 12.7 times less likely to be contaminated in ODF villages than non-ODF villages. Noting that the sanitation mission had improved the environment as well as people's health and dignity, Mr. Shekhawat said the mission would "continue to positively impact people's lives for a long time to come."

Asked about funding for the second phase, Mr. Shekhawat said, "With Modi ji as PM, there is no need to ask such a question. Whatever is required will be given."

While a World Bank grant would continue till January 2021, representatives of UNICEF and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation said they were working on faecal sludge management projects for phase two, but expected that greater attention and government funding may now be focussed on a new piped water scheme.

The *Nal se Jal* scheme aims to provide piped drinking water to every rural home by 2024, in response to studies showing that 84% of rural homes have no access to piped water, with more than 70% of the country's water contaminated. A second phase of Swachh Bharat may be key to reducing contamination, as the UNICEF study suggests.

"Having Water Resources under the same roof as Drinking Water and Sanitation (DWS) will allow greater coordination," said DWS secretary Parameswaran Iyer. "Think of them as the supply side, while we focus on a service delivery side."

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