

# INDIA:

## How Water Drives Change for the Right to Food

Adequate nutrition is a human right. Reducing malnutrition is not possible without access to clean water.

In northern India, villagers became architects of change: They participated in the planning for the construction of water pipelines – and gave their communities a boost to advance the Right to Food.



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### Something important was missing

Two and a half years ago, Lakshmi and Aman watched their village suffer. Due to the drought, the local fields barely yielded a harvest and their parents had to go to the city in search of making a precarious living. Back in the village of Barachh in the Bundelkhand region of Madhya Pradesh state in northern India, the children stayed with their grandparents. “Our diet was hardly balanced, there was always a lack of legumes or vegetables”, recalls Lakshmi, 15. “That made us weak and sick, so we often missed school.” While the Indian social safety net program entitled the family to buy subsidized wheat and rice, a healthy diet was out of reach. Vegetables? Only to be found at distant markets.

Lakshmi and Aman were not alone in their struggle for a balanced diet. The UN Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food emphasize that without access to clean water it is almost impossible to establish the basis for a healthy diet. But only 30 percent of households in the region had a tap water connection – despite the government’s ongoing efforts to lay more drinking water pipes, including to the home of Lakshmi and Aman’s grandparents. “That was exactly when we intervened,” says Yogesh Kumar from the NGO Samarthan. These infrastructure projects had constraints: Contractors and authorities wanted to build quickly, take the easiest route, not the most sustainable one; and the potential user population was only involved in a superficial manner. “Remote households were overlooked and the schemes for water delivery did not pay sufficient attention to locally sustainable maintenance”, Kumar says.

### We can do things differently

The situation started to change in Bundelkhand two and a half years ago. Samarthan came to the villages and invited residents to meetings. They helped to form and train village water and sanitation committees. The aim: to closely monitor the local authorities’ planning for the construction of water pipes. “The local people know where the best sources are and how the water flows”, Kumar says. “You can’t be successful with technical knowledge from an office

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alone.” So the villagers got together. They mapped their hamlet – every house, every street; no one was to be left behind. The residents elected a committee made up of 50 percent women who then supervised the work: Since then, no decision has been made without their approval.

Samarthan employed a citizen-centered method of development, namely Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Initially, authorities and pipeline builders were reluctant to listen to them. “But in the end, they recognized its value”, says Kumar.

It was important that the water schemes were properly handed over to the committees, which then assumed responsibility for maintenance themselves: They collect monthly tariffs from consumers – with 80 percent paying sufficient money in most villages to be used for maintenance. However, access to water alone is not enough: Samarthan equipped households with simple water filtration systems so that grey wastewater from the kitchen and bathroom can be channelled into a garden. For the first time, people are now growing vegetables locally – cauliflower, cabbage, beet root, cucumber – and are making their diet healthier. “We harvested our first crop after just 35 days”, recalls 15-year-old Lakshmi.

### Change achieved: Villages flourish

Together with Welthungerhilfe, Samarthan interprets the Right to Food as creating conditions enabling people to access healthy and nutritious food. Not only has a water supply been created, but one that also makes optimum use of the water. In 42 villages, the residents are taking matters into their own hands through the committees; a food security movement of 800 families has emerged through the new kitchen gardens: The vegetables produced add nutritional value, especially for children.

### Lessons learned

- **Only with a joint understanding of the problem** and strengthened capacities of construction companies, local authorities, local community institutions and villagers on the ground can real complementarity be achieved and investments be sustained in the long term.
- **Access to water is a pre-condition for achieving the Right to Food.** Citizens can claim their entitlements to safe water and adequate food through participation in planning, implementation and monitoring. Educated youth have a critical role in this process.
- **In addition to the municipal level, national level engagement is also important:** Samarthan is now collaborating with other organizations to call for government subsidies on a wider range of essential foods, including legumes and vegetables. This would add real value to achieving a healthy diet for all.



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**Dr Yogesh Kumar,  
Executive Director, Samarthan:**

The Right to Food will be sustainable when local institutions like village councils, village level committees and women’s collectives learn to value their traditional wisdom to find appropriate yet scientific solutions for water and food management in the region. Community leaders and youth are critical change makers at the grassroots. And only when consumers, suppliers and authorities pull together, a system is sustainably strengthened to attain the Right to Food for all.

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