

**Concept Note on the National Consultation on Setting Standards
and Improving Accessibility to Safe Drinking Water in India**

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Organized By

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BACKGROUND: The rural population of India comprises more than 700 million people residing in about 1.42 million habitations spread over 15 diverse ecological regions. It is true that providing safe drinking water to such a large population is an enormous challenge. The health burden of poor water quality is enormous. It is estimated that around 37.7 million Indians are affected by water borne diseases annually leading to a loss of 73 million working days. 1.5 million Children are estimated to die of diarrhea alone. The problem of chemical contamination is also prevalent with nearly 200,000 habitations in the country affected by poor quality water. While accessing drinking water continues to be a problem, assuring quality is a challenge by itself. Field studies have clearly indicated the direct co-relation between the quality of drinking water and the health aspects of the communities. Risk perception, assessment and communication are continuous process where characteristics of the message, messenger and receiver are very important. In rural areas, neither the local governments nor the drinking water supply agencies have the capacities to monitor and regulate the quality of supplied water; consequently, a large section of our rural population gets unmonitored and unregulated water supply. Major challenges that the rural water supply sector is facing today is not only to meet the large investment requirements to augment water supply, but also an additional investment burden to tackle water quality related problems.

GLOBAL INTERVENTION: Safe and clean drinking water and sanitation is a human right. The United Nations (UN) General Assembly declared on 26th July 2010, voicing deep concern that almost 900 million people worldwide do not have access to clean water. The 192-member Assembly also called on United Nations Member States and international organizations to offer funding, technology and other resources to help poorer countries scale up their efforts to provide clean, accessible and affordable drinking water and sanitation for everyone. The Assembly resolution received 122 votes in favour and zero votes against, while 41 countries abstained from voting. The text of the resolution expresses deep concern that an estimated 884 million people lack access to safe drinking water and a total of more than 2.6 billion people do not have access to basic sanitation. Studies also indicate about 1.5 million children under the age of five die each year and 443 million school days are lost because of water- and sanitation-related diseases. The resolution also welcomes the UN Human Rights Council's request that Catarina de Albuquerque, the UN Independent Expert on the issue of human rights obligations related to access to safe drinking water and sanitation, report annually to the General Assembly as well.

Ms de Albuquerque's report will focus on the principal challenges to achieving the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation, as well as on progress towards the relevant Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP) reports every two years on progress towards the drinking-water and sanitation target under MDG Goal 7. This target calls for halving the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation between 1990 and 2015. Estimates presented in its 2012 update report describe the situation at the end 2010 and supersede those of the JMP update published in March 2010. The report brings welcome news: measured by the proxy-indicator consistently used by the JMP since 2000, the MDG drinking-water target was met in 2010, and five years ahead of schedule. However, the job is far from done. An estimated 780 million still lacked safe drinking water in 2010, and the world is unlikely to meet the MDG sanitation target. We in India also need to sustain our efforts to ensure that we surpass the target put before us to be achieved by 2015. This national consultation is organized to bring all the stakeholders together to develop and agree on a action plan for India to improve accessibility and set mandatory standards for safe drinking water in a phased manner.

INTRODUCTION TO THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION: The proposed National Consultation shall base the two days deliberation on the fourth edition of the World Health Organization's (WHO) Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality, which builds on over 50 years of guidance by WHO, on drinking-water quality and has formed an authoritative basis for setting of national regulations and standards for water safety in support of public health. It is the product of significant revisions to clarify and elaborate on ways of implementing its recommendations of contextual hazard identification and risk management, through the establishment of health-based targets, catchment-to-consumer water safety plans and independent surveillance. The quality of drinking-water is a powerful environmental determinant of health. Assurance of drinking-water safety is a foundation for the prevention and control of waterborne diseases. WHO in their "Guidelines for Drinking-water Quality (2004)", conclude that end-product testing is not sufficient to guarantee safe drinking water to consumers; instead, WHO recommends planning and implementation of effective Water Safety Plans (WSPs) for ensuring safe drinking water to the citizens. WSPs concentrate on ensuring that the processes involved in delivering safe drinking water are operated properly and are under full control at all times. In addition, WSPs also address the issues of providing an organized and structured system to minimize the chance of failure through oversight or lapse of management.

ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING WATER A CONSUMER RIGHT: The consumers globally have the right to access safe drinking water. There are several studies with valid scientific evidences which have established how the consumers are victims to avoidable diseases caused due to accessibility to unsafe drinking water. The World Bank estimates 80% of communicable diseases in India are water related. Water

borne diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, and other gastro-intestinal disorders are a cause of prime concern and children, elderly and sick people are especially the most vulnerable population segments. Pollution of ground water and surface water sources also pose a serious risk for public health. With the growing awareness among the consumers for hazards of unsafe drinking water and multitude of diseases caused by water borne pathogens, demand for water purifiers providing safe portable water has been growing. In India, the weak water distribution infrastructure combined with questions on effective municipal water treatment plants have made point-of-use (POU) water purifiers a primary defense mechanism to remove various contaminants to make the water safe to drink. Thus the Indian consumer is pushed into boiling the water or buying one of the water purifiers as it becomes inevitable to use a POU water treatment device to provide safe and clean drinking water. Taking advantage of such a situation, some of the manufacturers are misleading the Indian consumers to over-sell POU water treatment devices by undermining the rights of the consumers on safety, information, choice and redress.

NEED FOR MANDATORY WATER STANDARDS: A recent study was commissioned by Healthy You Foundation, based on 30 years of insight on setting water standards in India to enable consumers to make an informed choice. It was observed that the service providers responsible to reach safe drinking water to the consumers always managed to get away without any kind of accountability towards the consumers on the quality and purity of water. In 1983 the Standard setting body in India, Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) made available the water standards IS 10500 and set the standards for safe drinking water. Subsequently it was revised three times to ensure that the Standard aligns with the Global Best Standards and was done as recently as 2012. In the year 2004, after great amount of pressure put on BIS and Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Government of India, standards for Natural Mineral Water and Packaged Drinking Water was formulated under IS: 13428:1998 and IS: 14543:2004 respectively and made mandatory under the provisions of Food Adulteration Act.1954 and now under the provisions of the Food Safety and Standards Act 2006. The study undertaken by Healthy You Foundation, looked at only the public health and safety issues concerning Storage Water Purifiers as it was observed that several tall claims were been made by the manufacturers on the purity and safety of the water delivered to the consumers from such devices. The members convinced the board of Healthy You Foundation to look into the claims made by the leading water purifiers so that the consumers can make an informed choice based on scientific evidence. As India does not have any existing Safety Standards for Storage Water Purifiers, the study had to lean mostly on existing standards or labeling information made available to the consumers of such products in United States of America and other European countries. As expected, the study found the claims to be misleading and revealed several alarming information on public health and safety. This initiated setting of standards for water derived from Storage Water Purifiers and hopefully we should soon be able to protect consumers from use of unregistered chemicals to purify water.

ROLE OF FOOD SAFETY AND STANDARDS AUTHORITY OF INDIA: The standards for safe potable water and water as an ingredient of food are now a mandate of FSSAI to implement under the provisions of the Food Safety and Standards Act 2006 (FSS Act). Diseases due to contaminated water used in food preparations have been found to be the single most important factor in food safety. There are many surveys which have confirmed the presence of E.coli in piped water in many cities in India. In the absence of standards for potable water, it is not possible to target any improvement in water quality. Department of Drinking water monitors the quality of water in the States. This information is largely unknown to the consumers and there is inadequate pressure to ensure the safety of potable water and the steps that are required to be taken in this regards. Keeping in view the importance of safe water for food safety, FSSAI proposes to work with State Food Authorities, State Department of Drinking Water, Panchayati Raj bodies and other stakeholders to raise awareness on the quality and safety of potable water, need to purify water before use and the safe handling and storage practices of water in food processing and manufacturing. Water quality standards are laid down in all developed countries and it is time for India to do so at the earliest. The first step in this direction would be to consider the available norms for potable water and develop feasible standards for potable water to be achieved within a defined time frame. This will enable focused efforts to ensure safe drinking water and water for use as an ingredient of food. In Delhi (and in other cities), water is sold in containers without hermetic sealing, thereby escaping from the definition of packaged water. There is need for regulating the safety of water which is not sold as packaged bottled water. The options available for determining standards for potable water may be considered at the proposed National Consultation with State Governments and other stakeholders. Initially these may be adopted as guidelines, while for processing units the quality of water used may be laid down as mandatory standards. FSS Act specifically includes water as an ingredient of food in its coverage and sooner or later would ensure compliance by food processors in our country.

OBJECTIVES OF THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION:

- **To agree on a Standard for India based on WHO Guidelines and BIS Standards for Drinking Water and Water for Food Processing as per the provisions of the existing laws and regulations in India**
- **To look at success models functioning in several States of India on accessibility to safe drinking water and understand how the models can be replicated throughout India to improve accessibility to safe drinking water**
- **To create a community driven National initiative with support from State and Central Governments to encourage Panchayati Raj Institutions and not-for-profit organizations to manage purification and distribution of safe water to every citizen at the most affordable cost.**
- **To establish certification and accreditation bodies along with water testing laboratories with NABL accreditation to ensure regular testing of the drinking**

water at the user level to monitor the quality and safety of the water supplied for drinking and processing of food to enable water purification plants and consumers to make an informed choice.

FORMAT OF THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION: The national consultation will invite representatives from all the stakeholders involved in the business of water purification, distribution and testing of water quality and safety at the user end. The consultation will seek technical and financial support from the Department of Drinking Water & Sanitation, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India along with the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India. It will also engage with Ministry of Urban Development, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution including experts from WHO, World Bank, Quality Council of India, BIS and others. It has been proposed that invitation shall be sent to more than 200 participants from all over India representing State Governments, private sector, water testing laboratories, Municipalities, Panchayati Raj Institutions, consumer organizations, NGOs and research institutions. The focus of the consultation will be to finalize the action plan based on the deliverables agreed by all the stakeholders to adopt mandatory standards for safe drinking water in a phased manner. The consultation will be held over two days on the following subjects:

1. The existing status on accessibility to safe drinking water in all the States of India
2. The Success stories in India on accessibility and affordability of safe drinking water and the technologies used for water purification
3. The 4th Edition of the WHO Guidelines on Safe Drinking water and the recent revised version of the BIS Standards for Safe Potable water
4. What should be the way forward in a phased manner to adopt mandatory standards for potable water and water for food processing
5. How to create a national autonomous body to ensure improving accessibility to safe drinking water to all by 2020 with the involvement of the State Governments
6. Accessibility to safe drinking water is a Consumer and Human Rights Issue
7. Building capacity within testing laboratories to achieve NABL accreditation and linking them with certification bodies to monitor water quality and safety
8. Involving Panchayati Raj Institutions and NGOs to manage water purification and distribution as per standards as a self sustainable activity to improve accessibility to safe drinking water to the community at the most affordable cost.

CONCLUSION: Provision of safe drinking water is a basic necessity. Rural drinking water supply is a State subject and has been included in the Eleventh Schedule of the Constitution of India, among the subjects that may be entrusted to Panchayats by the States. To accelerate the pace of coverage of problem villages with respect to provision of drinking water, the Government of India introduced the Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme (ARWSP) in 1972–73, to support States and UTs with financial and technical assistance in implementing drinking water supply

schemes in such villages. In order to address the major issues like sustainability, water availability and supply, poor water quality, etc., the Rural Drinking Water Supply Guidelines have been revised w.e.f. 1.4.2009. The revised program known as **National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP)** focuses on the following areas:

- Moving forward from achieving habitation level coverage towards household level drinking water coverage.
- Moving away from over dependence on single drinking water source to multiple sources, through conjunctive use of surface water, groundwater and rainwater harvesting.
- Ensuring sustainability in drinking water schemes and preventing slip back.
- Encouraging water conservation methods including revival of traditional water bodies.
- Convergence of all water conservation programmes at the village level;
- Ensuring household level drinking water security through water budgeting and preparation of village water security plans.
- Consciously moving away from high cost treatment technologies for tackling arsenic and fluoride contamination to the development of alternative sources in respect of arsenic contamination and alternate sources/dilution of aquifers through rainwater harvesting for tackling fluoride contamination.
- Developing the capability of preliminary drinking water testing at the Gram Panchayat level.
- Establishing Water Testing Laboratory facilities with respect to drinking water, at the district and subdivision level.
- Linking of Water Quality Monitoring & Surveillance with the Jalmani guidelines for implementation of standalone drinking water purification systems in rural schools.
- Encouraging handing over of management of rural drinking water schemes (RWS) to the Panchayati Raj Institutions (incentive of 10% of the NRDWP allocation for the States that transfer the management, is introduced).

EXPECTED OUTCOMES AND TANGIBLE DELIVERABLES:

- ❖ **Agreeing on a Standard for Potable water and Water for Food Processing based on WHO Guidelines and existing BIS Standards**
- ❖ **Create a time-bound action plan to ensure accessibility to safe drinking water to all the citizens in India by 2020**
- ❖ **Seek commitment from State Governments on the Action Plan and facilitate in developing a template on how to encourage community based initiatives**
- ❖ **Full report on the National Consultation and recommendations for State Governments and Central Government**
- ❖ **Launching a National Organization on Quality and Safety of Water**

- ❖ **Establishing a task force for periodical monitoring and reporting system at various levels, by fixing time bound achievable targets to coordinate and review progress in achieving the MDG**