When the pandemic crisis hit the world a few months ago, priorities changed overnight for almost everyone. We saw a large number of people stepping up to help others who were falling sick, had lost jobs, were stranded hundreds of kilometers away from their homes, or couldn’t afford/access food and other basic essentials. Immediate relief ensured that we, as a country, stood united against this pandemic and basic needs of vulnerable groups were fulfilled, at least to the extent possible. Presently, most of the time and resources of government and civil societies is being spent in ensuring that the challenges thrown at us by the crisis are dealt with as effectively as possible. It has taken precedence over business-as-usual, and all other programs have come to a halt.

Addressing the shortage of essentials like food and drinking water has been one of the top priorities of our partners in the last two months.
But as the response from the heart to help fellow citizens continues to happen, there is also a lot of forward thinking that people have been doing. As an organization, we, at Arghyam, responded to the need of the hour and engaged with partners on the ground who have triggered action and taken a lead to support relief work across the country. However, as we do this, we are also keeping an eye out on our mission - to build capacities of frontline actors for water security at scale - while dealing with medium and longer term impacts of this pandemic.

It is rightly said that crises such as this brings out the best in people and breeds innovation. The goal of water security is not becoming any less urgent or important, if anything it is becoming more so. So, there is a growing demand for what can be done despite the constraints that COVID has imposed.

Several of our partners are conducting surveys even during the lockdown period by reaching out to communities using simple mobile-based technologies and are getting responses from them. It is helping them understand how the ground is shifting during the crisis and how interventions can be designed to respond to it. Technology has resolved the challenge of keeping in touch with people in our networks and it is ensuring that everyone is connected, energized, and positive even amidst the difficult situation around us.

Our partners and other actors in the government have picked up tools from other sectors and are utilizing those to keep connected to the ecosystem, disseminate knowledge, generate awareness, and most importantly, build lasting relationships that will strengthen their networks during and beyond this pandemic.
Learning more and better

In the last few months, people have wanted to get connected to experts and hear directly from them on how they could deal with the “new normal” but also make the best use of time they have to prepare for the uncertain future. Experiences of our partners show that people across geographies have tried to come together to learn from what others are doing and are showing much more willingness to adopt new technologies and mechanisms. One such model which has been used extensively in the health sector for quite some time but is now finding relevance and gaining popularity across sectors in the ECHO model.

ECHO stands for Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes and was started in the US by Dr Sanjeev Arora to promote collaborative learning with the motto to “move knowledge, not people”. Using teleconferencing as a tool, it enables peer-to-peer virtual learning, so that healthcare professionals located even in remote areas can learn directly from experts, present cases and get resolutions, and can provide better services to their patients. We, at Arghyam, have been exploring this model for the water sector as a tool to build capacities of frontline workers such as watermen, water committee members, GP representatives etc. who are scattered across the length and breadth of the country. These community representatives and volunteers, if enabled with the right knowledge and skills, can plan and execute any program better to achieve sustainable outcomes.

During this pandemic and the lockdown in place, programs have been finding it difficult to take-off the conventional way. And this model is slowly emerging as a key to training program functionaries and field professionals remotely. Our partners who have picked this up are finding virtual interactions more productive and purposeful.

Learning virtually with structure and discipline

A program on landscape management in Meghalaya adopted this model almost a year ago along with digital content to train its master trainers and village facilitators. With a capacity building plan that matched the evolution in technology, it has been able to launch the training phase of the program during the
lockdown to reach community resource persons (CRPs) in the remotest of villages through smartphones. A recent survey conducted in the State showed that 74% frontline workers have smartphones and over 90% of them have access to at least partly good internet connections in their village, satisfying the minimum requirement for online training.

Another organisation that works on “commons” management in India has also been able to scale up its efforts to four states by training field trainers on topics like MGNREGS. These field trainers work with local institutions and strengthen the governance system, which assumes more importance now than ever before. Experience from these training sessions shows the eagerness amongst people in rural areas to not miss out on any learning opportunities. People were seen sitting at a corner of their terraces, or under a tree at the end of the village - just so that they could get a stable internet connection to listen to the trainers and view the content displayed on the screen.

“The sessions are focussed on relevant topics, well planned, start and finish on time, and give us opportunities to ask questions and talk to the trainers. I do miss the face-to-face interaction we had with trainers and with peers in classroom sessions earlier but I find no difference in our learning”.
Meetha Lal, Community Resource Person from Pali district Rajasthan.
NREGA activities are picking up in villages. NGOs are training frontline workers virtually on executing it towards meaningful objectives while following government protocols for safety.

A similar training program is also unfolding in Maharashtra, the state which has trained over 150,000 frontline workers on COVID safety and WASH. Expert organizations on water are training CRPs on components of Jal Jeevan Mission, so that they are prepared to start working on the program as soon as it is launched in the districts.

ECHO India also delivered a session on mental health management to NGOs who had sought support for their staff on the ground, not just to manage their own stress facing the unknown but also help communities manage their mental health during this crisis. The session was anchored by NIMHANS and more than 200 people from different organizations participated in it. Video resources from the session can be found here (additional resource here).

**Enabling Peer to Peer Learning**

Arghyam is supporting RCRC coalition (Rapid Rural Community Response to Covid), Samerth Charitable Trust, Bharatiya Jan Utthan Parishad, INREM, SOPPECOM, Gandhigram Trust - amongst others to provide immediate relief to communities. Connecting these NGOs with each other for sharing learnings between the organizations is another form of support that we have attempted to provide.

To enable this peer-to-peer learning, a virtual session was organized between these NGOs working on COVID relief. The grassroot organizations shared with each other several protocols that each one has followed for ensuring their staff safety in the time of this pandemic.
The discussion covered several themes including but not limited to mental well-being of NGO staff, medical insurance for COVID cases, beneficiary selection and relief kit distribution protocols to maintain social distance, PPE usage and disposal techniques and importance of nutrition to develop human immunity. Key takeaways from the session are recorded here. Such sessions are helping organizations get an aggregated view of the problems, share solutions, and start planning for the medium and long term.

**Gender and Virtual Training**

After having coordinated or observed a large number of online training sessions, it is becoming clear that virtual training is one of the better ways for capacity building of program functionaries, especially the “first mile” or the frontline. With conferencing and training tools adding advanced features and participants getting more and more familiar with the tools, the sessions are quickly becoming seamless in all geographies. A large number of programs are making it mandatory for women participation in programs but we have also seen that women find it difficult to travel to training venues and stay there for the entire training duration, because they have children to take care of and household chores to complete. This results in absenteeism in classroom sessions and missed opportunities for women CRPs. But by conducting some parts of training online, organizations and programs are providing women an opportunity to learn and participate meaningfully. If large scale programs on water which seek women participation at village-level adopt these tools, they might actually empower women and ensure their real participation.

“We had to carry our small children with us to towns when we went for day-long sessions and the men at home did not take it kindly when we were not available all day long to serve them food and take care of other needs. It used to be mentally stressful for us. Now, we plan our day in advance when we get notified of the training schedule, finish household chores, take care of the children and then, peacefully sit to learn. It is very easy to follow what trainers teach us. We also feel very comfortable to ask questions and get our doubts clarified in a virtual session.”

Sunita Bunker and Tejkanwar, Field Trainers from Chittorgarh, Rajasthan
Helping Find the Right Digital Content

In an attempt to support our partners to access useful information for dissemination while they have been busy with helping those in need, we made an effort to compile content created by different actors including the Government of India. With multiple sources of information available to people, often resulting in spread of rumours and false information, a credible digital content source is more relevant than ever. This content bank is hosted on India Water Portal (IWP) and can be accessed here. Several organizations, agencies and partners have highly appreciated the content bank effort which helped them reach communities with credible and relevant information and awareness materials.

CONTENT ON COVID-19

922 CONTENT PIECES AVAILABLE IN 34 LANGUAGES/DIALECTS FROM 26 SOURCES

No. of content pieces by language

Language
- Hindi: 239
- English: 106
- Marathi: 81
- Gujarati: 68
- Telugu: 57
- Kannada: 45
- Tamil: 44
- Punjabi: 40
- Bangla: 36
- Others: 206

Content Format

- Video: 45.8%
- Audio: 10.9%
- Image: 17.0%
- Presentation: 2.7%
- Document: 23.6%
Bringing unfiltered realities from the ground

India Water Portal had more than 1 lakh users visiting the site in April 2020, the Hindi Portal had around 4 lakh users during the same period. In response to the pandemic, IWP (English) has pivoted to host the content bank as shown before and also curated several stories of relief efforts, some of these have been curated in our fortnightly newsletters here (one and two). The IWP team has also been talking to people on ground to bring out a large number of stories from rural areas through interviews and virtual interactions that do not make it to the mainstream media otherwise.

IWP has also seen several articles from the Arghyam team in the last month on Covid and other topics. A curation of some of the main articles we’ve published are below:

1. In conversation with Rohini Nilekani: Water, societal platform thinking and COVID-19 response
2. WASH in the times of Covid-19
3. Spreading awareness on COVID-19
4. Relief with dignity to the vulnerable, in the times of Covid
5. Building resilience of communities during and after Covid
6. Collective action against Coronavirus
7. Springing back to life
8. Jal Jeevan Mission: Will piped water to every household no longer be a pipe dream?
9. From policy to practice: Can National Water Policy 2020 bridge the gap?
10. Technology to build knowledge and capacities beyond COVID
Enabling the “first-mile” through digital capabilities

The experience of the last three months has affirmed our hypothesis that the frontline is ready to adopt digital tools for better learning. Incorporating these lessons into the program design can be crucial to take-off of new programs or resuming of halted programs in the new normal. We, at Arghyam, have been keenly interested in enabling this change over the last two years through catalytic funding to digital context experts, trainers, change management agents, and digital consultants. Beyond support to design training and creating digital content for ease of access, we are also supporting programs to digitally attest their participants so that they are visible as trained resources even beyond the programs. This, we feel, can go a long way in motivating them to learn better and strive for other livelihood opportunities. Problems, share solutions, and start planning for the medium and long term.
We may be ready to establish a new normal

We see that behaviours and processes that are getting triggered are very likely to remain and survive the COVID crisis to create more sustainable and desirable outcomes. Time and money spent on travel may get optimized so that physical travel is kept for the most necessary interactions. These constructs may allow more women to participate in decision making on water management creating favourable gender shifts in the sector. Operating models for NGOs may change to become much more economically sustainable for scaled operations so that they can influence more and better outcomes for the same investment. This will be welcomed by the Governments and funders alike.

As with anything new, there will always be challenges and so it will remain upto us to be supportive and alert. We need to collectively nudge and steer ourselves through this crisis so that even as we provide immediate relief to our vulnerable citizens we seize the opportunity to alter the paradigm so that we can do more with less.

For many decades, we see weeks happen and then in a few weeks, decades happen!