

Peer power in knowledge networking: the Change Management Forum experience in India

Vijaya Venkataraman* and V. Srinivas Chary

Centre for Urban Governance, Administrative Staff College, India

This paper describes a pioneering initiative in urban India, with respect to information networking and knowledge support for service delivery in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector that has been impacting policy and practice. What makes the initiative unique is the model and processes it adopted – the scale, support from the national government and a mechanism for the convergence of technical support of national and international agencies. This experience highlights the critical role of knowledge networking through peer exchange in bringing about sustainable changes in service delivery through the Change Management Forum, a network of cities and utilities on water and sanitation reforms.

Introduction

The year 2008 marked a turning point for the urban water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector in India. For the first time, a national level awards programme, the National Urban Water Awards, was organized with the support of the Government of India (GoI), explicitly to honour and recognize excellence in urban WASH service delivery by cities and water boards. Entries to the Awards programme were a veritable showcase of achievements, reflecting diversity and richness in geographical spread, standards and scale of services, use of technology, managerial practices, citizen responsive governance and the partnership models adopted. Providing continuous water supply to citizens, including the urban poor, was no longer met with disbelief, but had become the norm to be achieved. WASH was firmly on the national development agenda as never before. The Awards programme resulted in institutionalizing a platform for information sharing and knowledge networking with innovations and outcomes documented and showcased real time across more than five thousand city governments and water boards.

We look back on the journey that culminated in the Awards; it had been a long one and had commenced almost a decade ago with a modest knowledge network of cities and water boards aiming to support positive reforms in the urban WASH sector in India.

The WASH context in urban India

India, a country of over a billion population, has been going through a rapid process of urbanization. Currently, a third of the population lives in urban areas and service delivery

*Corresponding author. Email: vijayavee@gmail.com

Box 1

Each and every initiative of the National Urban Water Awards programme is a lesson in itself worthy of emulation. While some of the entries have been awarded, I believe that those who have participated are all winners. Excellence in the delivery of municipal services should be the motto of Indian cities. Continuous water supply, universal access and sanitation facilities in cities should be our mission. And we need to accomplish this fast. I am sure that the National Urban Water Awards will prove to be a big morale booster for our urban local bodies, water utilities and functionaries. (The President of India while officiating at the National Urban Water Awards-Ceremony, August 2009)

to the urban population in the key sectors of water and sanitation remains a challenge for the local governments and water boards who are responsible for provision. While the requisite infrastructure, technology and human resources are available, the weak financial position of urban local bodies and water boards, inadequate accountability systems to citizens especially the poor, inadequate financial and management practices, limited autonomy and poor information management continue to beset the sector. It was apparent that institutional inadequacies needed to be overcome and in order to do so, municipal managers/providers were to be better equipped to address institutional reform, i.e. through learning and managing change to provide adequate and sustainable water and sanitation services to the urban population. Conventional training programmes and curriculum were focused heavily on infrastructure provision, technology and engineering practices, rather than the learning and management of change in the WASH sector. What was missing was well-targeted and sector-specific management development programmes for managers and practitioners.

In an attempt to bridge the gap, the Centre for Urban Governance at the Administrative Staff College of India, introduced a series of programmes from 2001. The Management Development Programme for Senior Urban Public Health Officials (MDSUPHO) was developed in collaboration with the Water Engineering Development Centre (WEDC) and Loughborough University, UK, and supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). The objective of the programme was to provide exposure to cutting edge functionaries to the issues related to public health engineering, particularly the factors which are essential for effective, equitable, sustainable and efficient supply of drinking water and sanitation, while also working with local technical agencies to reorient the conventional curriculum. The programme was externally reviewed and found to be ‘a well-designed and skilfully delivered product’. Although participants saw themselves as managers, trainers and leaders, equipped with essential tools, the review concluded that ‘participants found it difficult to initiate change in isolation, within an organization, without the support of the top management (read “policymakers”)’ (DFID 2001).

Charting a new course

For the Centre for Urban Governance at the Administrative Staff College of India (ASCI), and its long-standing collaborators in the sector, including local government functionaries, there was an increasing realization that provision of skills and knowledge in a traditional top-down approach would not be effective in the long run. The scope and nature of

engagement had to be redefined. This implied that engaging with the technical personnel alone would not suffice and the policymakers, i.e. the political leaders, would have to be on board to enable the application of change management and knowledge transfer. It was then that the idea of a network of peers comprising a critical mass of key policymakers who would lead the way, rather than follow, emerged. And the Change Management Forum resulted.

The Change Management Forum (CMF) is a partnership initiative of cities and utilities to support implementation of reforms in Indian urban water and sanitation sector through peer exchange and learning for city-level policymakers/sector managers who are aware of and committed to change management in the sector. The CMF was initiated by the Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD), GoI, in partnership with ASCI, Hyderabad and Water and Sanitation Programme-South Asia (WSP-SA). The WEDC, UK, and the Institute for Water and Environment (IWE), Cranfield University, UK, were the technical partners of this initiative. The CMF was initially supported by DFID. ASCI is the secretariat of the CMF and manages its activities with support and guidance from MoUD, GOI and WSP-SA.

An expressed and demonstrated commitment through sustained local improvement initiatives and leadership is a primary criteria for membership in the CMF; an initial selection of 25 progressive City Governments/Utilities for membership from all over India – from elected leaders and officials and directors of water utilities – constituted the nucleus of CMF activity.

Knowledge networking through peer exchange: the Change Management Forum

Mission statement

The mission of the CMF is to promote institutional and organizational development and support reform of the urban water and sanitation sector in India through peer exchange and knowledge networking. It advocates the commercial and customer orientation of services, capacity building and knowledge transfer through dialogues and partnerships. The CMF brings together staff of water utilities, municipalities including elected leaders who have demonstrated a commitment to reform through sustained local improvement initiatives and leadership.

Box 2

The CMF is a good institutional process to exchange knowledge and ideas, and one which needs to be strengthened. Innovation is the key to success. (Secretary Urban Development, Government of Sikkim)¹

Membership and structure

The CMF has been formed to develop a cadre of policymakers/sector managers (including municipal commissioners, municipal administrators, chief engineers, financial institutions and other key players) who are aware of and committed to change management in the sector with a focus on a new commercial and consumer orientation. The participants of the CMF are the potential ‘change champions’.

The CMF had a formal structure with clearly defined roles. It was chaired by a senior official of the Government of India, supported by a formal Secretariat and guided by an Advisory Committee. The CMF also received technical assistance of the WEDC, UK, and IWE, Cranfield University and financial assistance of the DFID for the first two years.

Following an initial exercise of mapping to selectively identify municipalities/water boards from around the country based on demonstrated commitment and leadership in the sector, 25 municipalities became members of the CMF. Each member city/member utility entered into an MoU with the CMF Secretariat to ensure continuity and formal commitment.

Box 3

CMF idea should be taken as example for carrying out any type of reform. (Director Finance, Vishakapatnam Municipal Corporation)

Strategy

The CMF operated as an output-based network providing resource-intensive support to facilitate peer exchange and learning. The modus operandi was through (1) creating an enabling environment, (2) facilitative support for peer exchange and learning, and (3) ongoing monitoring and feedback.

Creating an enabling environment

The CMF brought together policymakers and officials/technical personnel on a common platform where they could think, share, and learn, unfettered by official hierarchy. Secretariat support would take care of administration and logistics associated with activities. To ensure exchange within and outside the CMF, networking programmes were initiated with training institutes, government agencies and other resource centres.

Facilitative activities for peer exchange

The CMF leverage was the nurturing of change champions and preparing ground for effective actions. Through peer exchange programmes, local issues were debated, home-grown models showcased and analysed and city-to-city learning facilitated. At the same time the learning was mediated by making available the best of international expertise and experience through seminars and overseas visits. Training material and other knowledge services allowed the formal documentation and dissemination and report on key sector developments, performance indicators, etc. and to reach out to a larger audience.

Ongoing monitoring and feedback

The CMF members, as part of their commitment, also developed 'Action Plans' for change, the implementation of which was supported by collective knowledge resources/technical assistance/funding support and the progress of which, was tracked and shared among the members.

Box 4

The big advantage of CMF is that whatever you want to do in your municipality, it is not one brain, thinking about it but 25 brains, all of a similar nature. When I have an idea, I take it to the forum to discuss it and get input into how to do it best... whatever is at Ramagundam has had 25 minds to think about it. CMF gives more confidence to put ideas on the ground. Everyone has ideas, but putting them into practice is a different matter. In CMF you can say to 25 people: 'this is my requirement – what can you come up with?' (Head, Municipality of Ramagundam, Andhra Pradesh State)

Activities

The CMF activities were formally agreed on and included few spontaneous activities at the outset.

Networking

Subsequent to formal commitment by CMF members through an MoU, systematic actions to set up linkages with government agencies, training institutes and other resource centres. A case in point is networking with engineering institutes to upgrade and reorient curricula to address current challenges in the WASH sector. Another area was advocacy with the Government of India on specific policy and programmatic areas to ensure buy-in and support, e.g. the provision of continuous water supply in urban areas.

Seminars/workshops/study tours

Following the inception seminar field visits were organized twice a year. An overseas visit was also organized providing international exposure for the first time to many of the network members. Members visited unique initiatives and innovative practices together, resulting in new ideas and debates. It became a practice for each member city to 'host' a visit and members visited each other in turns, each one showcasing good practices, seeking ideas for chronic problems, setting their own targets and sharing progress, and proved to be a very effective motivation factor for the host member.

Action Plans and tracking change

Each of the members developed 'Action Plans for Change', shared progress, and sought suggestions, review and feedback from their peers. Technical advice and assistance was arranged through the CMF Secretariat wherever feasible. Participating members are encouraged to report their recent initiatives in areas related to institutional and organizational development, human resource management, financial reforms, tariffs and investment planning, customer services and billing, services delivery to low-income areas, water supply and operation and maintenance (O&M), environment management, sewerage and low-cost sanitation. The mechanism and process of tracking change requires analysis and documentation of initiatives in all the above areas over a period of time with the help of different methods including questionnaire, field visits, interviews, etc. The CMF tracks and shares the reform initiatives taken up by the participating members. This helps in identifying the gaps and support systems needed to facilitate and strengthen the change

management process. The analysis and dissemination of initiatives provides impetus to the ULBs in initiating and sustaining the reforms through peer learning and review.

Box 5

CMF helps the members to learn experiences from different urban local bodies and even if the action plans are not 100%, the attempt itself is worth creating success stories. (Mr V.B. Advisor, Government of India)

Knowledge resources

A newsletter and other knowledge resources were developed for the use of members as well as other practitioners and urban managers. Members contributed to and followed the newsletter ‘Change Management Times’, began to use the dedicated website and used the CMF as an enquiry service to obtain specific information that was timely, relevant and quality-assured.

Box 6

The theme in the CM Times for better practices and positive change in water utility is really need of the time. The CMF has strong backup from international, national organizations and ASCI Hyderabad. Your personal efforts in promoting CMF and bringing government organizations, International Institutes, Municipal Councils and WEDC people is highly appreciated. (S.A. Deshmane, Superintending Engineer, Kolhapur)

Box 7

The Newsletter was informative and gave an insight into the development activities, especially in the water supply and sanitation sector. The Newsletter succinctly explained the improvement that can take place in any sector with the concerted efforts of all governmental and non-governmental community. (Mr R. Sethuraman, Deputy Adviser, Public Health, Govt. of India)

Technical assistance

The CMF also witnessed surprise champions as in the case of a small municipality, Ramagundam, which led by its dynamic head and elected leader, decided to develop a pilot programme for effecting provision of continuous water supply, virtually unheard of in urban India. His drive and interest was catalysed by a seminar on ‘Continuous Water Supply as an Achievable Target’ and the overseas visits to Singapore and Malaysia. To support the implementation the CMF was able to attract the interest of a multilateral donor agency to provide technical resources to support a detailed project report for the implementation of continuous water supply in Ramagundam. The successful implementation of the project challenged the conventional notion that continuous water supply required large investments and would prove to be unviable. A small town, virtually unheard of, was now on the national radar.

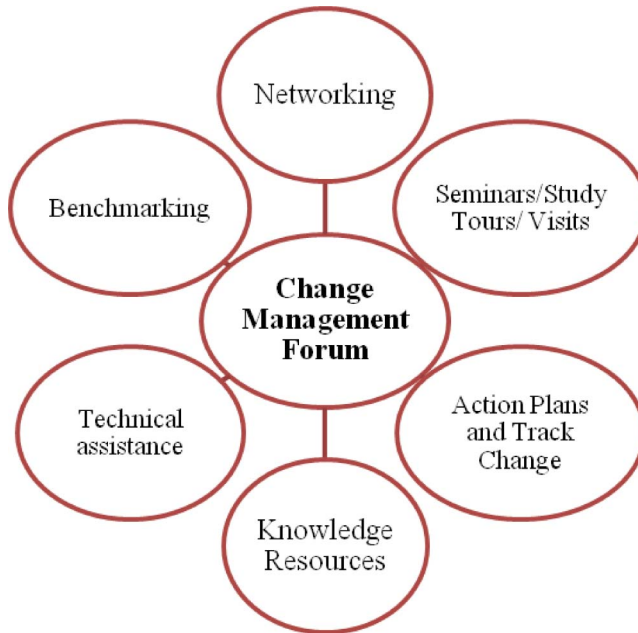


Figure 1. CMF activities: a representation.

Benchmarking

Performance data of more than 50 local governments across India were compiled and analysed to enable CMF members and others to compare how they were faring vis-a-vis cities and established sector benchmarks. Data on performance indicators as well as case studies and good practices from these municipalities were documented and shared.

Box 8

CMF also promotes comradely: we are in it together attitude from MC/Mayors who are often under a lot of heat and criticism to produce results. Therefore CMF allows a level of emotional bonding – seeing others also struggling in their situations. (Elected Leader, location not documented)

Unique features

The CMF had a core membership from various parts of India representing a variety of geographic locations, small, medium and large towns at various stages of development. For the first time in India, the CMF promoted city-to-city learning through peer networking. At the same time, knowledge transfer was mediated through an organized platform and knowledge resources were centralized. Application of knowledge transfer was also facilitated through well-defined outputs allowing flexibility and long-term review on a frequent basis through:

- Action-oriented working with municipalities/institutions aimed at fostering collaboration and facilitating change

- Aiming at reforms at local level
- Wide range of information dissemination paths
- Bringing in national and international experience to a single platform

A select group of 25 cities acting as ‘change champions’ for the sector in a country of around 5000 towns and cities nevertheless formed a ‘critical mass’ and their contributions to the sector were pioneering efforts. Requests for membership increased and new members were added as the work of the CMF progressed.

Box 9

Things then get discussed at other meetings and word gets about of your improvements and everyone wants to know how you did it and what they can do to improve. Also, neighbouring towns catch on and copy ideas. (Dr Kartikeyen)

Key outcomes and achievements

Service delivery improvements

The ‘Action Plans for Change’ could realize some successful on-the-ground implementation, supported occasionally by technical assistance, and more often, by policy and advisory support from the CMF Secretariat. Reforms ranging from technical innovations to improved customer relations, from participatory platforms for governance to high-tech Geographical Information Systems (GIS) solutions were implemented, improving the quality and scope of municipal service delivery. The most important thing was that these were achieved without significant financial resources and mostly through knowledge gain of processes and models.

Box 10

CMF has a lot of potential due to its role in adult learning. That’s what we all are... adults. CMF facilitates adult learning and one of the main inhibitors of change is a lack of knowledge and capacity. (Mr Gopal, Director, Water Board, Hyderabad)

A big problem in India is the ‘what’s in it for me’ mentality. Whereas CMF gives them something to work towards. It creates an atmosphere of competition. If they can do it, then why can’t we? It allows the diffusion of possibility, inspiration and motivation. (Mr Yesu Ratnam, Mayor of Guntur)

I took inspiration from CMF, we started Jal Adalat (the Water Justice Forum) and seven stations for public grievance redressals. (Mr S.C. Rai, Mayor of Lucknow)

Advocacy and national policy

From 2003 the CMF has been advocating the cause of continuous water supply in Indian cities. While this was initially met with disbelief and apprehension, the CMF was able to support piloting of continuous water supply in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh State, Bangalore (Karnataka State) and Chandanagore (West Bengal State) through exposure visits, workshops, information dissemination, knowledge support and networking. This

led to interest in international agencies, bilateral and funding agencies such as the WSP-SA, US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) to interact with city governments to promote the cause of continuous water supply. In 2005 the Ministry of Urban Development, GoI, introduced the largest urban development program in India: the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM). The CMF could, on account of working with the Ministry, influence the urban water agenda to promote the cause of continuous water supply through a combination of fiscal and technical support measures supported by governance reforms to ensure sustenance of infrastructure provision under the JNNURM. As of 2010, at least 47 cities are now in various stages of progress in implementing provision for continuous water supply in their cities.

Box 11

If 24/7 was achieved, less water would be used in total. People wouldn't have to store water. Many people store around 500 litres and then throw it when the water comes again. Think about this for a 6 million population... a lot of water is wasted. (Head, Ramagundam Municipality)

CMF members actively planned and organized a national event on adopting universal sanitation as a national goal in 2005 (also known as the Pune Declaration). Following a process of consultation the Task Force drafted an urban sanitation policy to address the provision of universal sanitation on a mission mode and was recently formally legislated by the Government of India. A state and city roll-out process has now been initiated.

Box 12

CMF became oxygen to reactivate the organization to take initiatives. Whatever reforms we have made in Port Blair Municipal Corporation is only after joining and taking inspiration from CMF. (Mr A.R. Talwade, Secretary, Port Blair)

I have no words in my deep appreciation and gratitude for the CMF members for the opportunity they have given us to find solutions for sustainable water supply. (Mr Rasheed Ahmed, Lucknow)

Towards institutionalization

The CMF, in order to stay manageable and focused, comprised only of around 25 municipalities as against the 5000-plus urban local governments in India. Triggered by peer learning and exchange, various initiatives had taken off – the question was how to sustain the momentum to continue to consolidate gains in the WASH context. The National Urban Water Awards proved to be this platform – a metamorphosis of the Change Management Forum into a permanent and dynamic showcase of achievements and learning in WASH services in urban India.

The CMF experience has also traversed beyond the WASH sector. Drawing from the CMF experience, a nationwide initiative on thematic peer networking of cities, beyond the WASH agenda and spanning a spectrum of urban development-related sectors, commenced in 2007 facilitated by the national government.

While CMF with its focus on watsan and the thematic peer networking of cities on urban development issues predominantly involved process learning and sharing, the need was felt also for a nationwide and timely information support service to cities on themes ranging from service delivery to economy and technology providers. This again has led to a large-scale institutionalization of an enquiry service available both offline and online – the Urban Resource Link, taking off from the CMF enquiry service. Interestingly, the Government of India has provided endorsement to this initiative and even utilize the service themselves.

Box 13

I would like to inform you that having association with the organisation like CMF, we are being enlightened continuously and in many ways. Bringing about change or developing culture for accepting change within any set-up is a difficult task. But continuous and relentless efforts do pay off. (Mr Dhan Subba, Principal Chief Engineer cum Secretary, Govt. of Sikkim, Gangtok)

Lessons and reflection

We share a few lessons here in brief. We also discuss the issue of up-scaling the peer networking initiative to reach out countrywide.

- *Motivation:* Peers can be the biggest motivation to initiate and innovate as well showcase achievements
- *Potential for reform:* Making available knowledge of processes and information on working models have gone a long way in making improvements in service delivery
- *Experiences:* National and international experiences are equally valuable
- *Seeing is believing:* Study tours made lasting impressions that many of the members carried back with them and used for implementation
- *Change on the ground:* Knowledge transfer – both know-how and do-how are powerful recipes to effect tangible on the ground change
- *Individual champions:* The role of individual change champions was crucial. There was also a flip side to this in the eventuality of the individual moving away, the initiative suffered and stagnated
- *Resource-intensive:* Change management processes through peer learning and knowledge transfer require intensive facilitation, deployment of dedicated time and financing
- *Technical assistance:* Global partnerships and international experiences were well utilized
- *Business model:* Following the completion of funding support, members were more than willing to contribute an annual fee towards sustaining the CMF model
- *Linkages:* The linkages to training, consulting and research activities catalysed knowledge networking activities. Case studies and documentation material from one fed into another effectively.

Reflections on scaling up

The CMF is distinct from conventional information/knowledge support services and networks in that they are owned and supported by government and aligned with current

needs; cover a range of themes relating to policy, strategy, operational arrangements and implementation; and address specific, practical information needs of elected representatives and officials of cities, being flexible and accessible through different channels. An analysis of the information needs reveal the most frequent category of information needs to be on:

- Benchmarks – how do we fare, what are others doing
- Policy/Programmes/Schemes – the latest
- Contracting and Outsourcing – managing consultants
- Best Practices – how did they achieve it
- Clearinghouse Support – experts, technology providers
- Use of technology – what is available, how to access and utilize
- Leveraging Resources – how to be bankable, credit rating

The challenge now lies in institutionalizing the provision of a dynamic and interactive knowledge platform, a nationwide peer-to-peer learning and exchange on a continuous basis, one-stop shop for all information needs, dedicated resources including knowledge managers and roll-out to reach all cities. A range of models may be explored including setting up of decentralized hubs as a more reliable and workable model. Practitioners from other sectors like rural development and health are also keen to pilot the CMF peer networking experience in their respective domains and we believe that this is testimony to the relevance of the CMF experience both to the WASH context and to the development sector in general.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to extend thanks to the Ministry of Urban Development, Government of India, the network members of the Change Management Forum, the Department for International Development, United Kingdom, the Water Engineering Development Centre, Loughborough University, United Kingdom and the Water and Sanitation Program-South Asia.

Note

1. The quotes from interviews with network members of the Change Management Forum were collected partly from personal notes and feedback on CMF sought for the newsletter, 'Change Management Times', and from Farrington (2004).

Notes on contributors

Vijaya Venkataraman is a Faculty Member with the Urban Governance Programme at the Administrative Staff College of India in Hyderabad, India. Her areas of professional interest include service delivery, decentralization, policy reforms and knowledge management. She coordinates the 'Urban Resource Link', an information support service for city governments in India.

V. Srinivas Chary is the Dean of Research and Management Studies at the Administrative Staff College of India. He provides leadership support to the Change Management Forum and initiated the National Urban Water Awards programme in India. He was elected as an Ashoka Fellow for his championing of continuous water supply in India.

References

- DFID, 2001. *Report on review of the MDSUPHO Training Programme*. Quoted in Administrative Staff College of India and Water Engineering Development Centre, Proposal for Phase II of Change Management Forum under DFID Contract Number 000962 (MDSUPHO), 2002, India [internal document].
- Farrington, R., 2004. *Reform in the Indian water sector: a focus on the change management forum*. MSc thesis, University of Cranfield, Silsoe.