

Asian Development Bank approved a financing package of \$245 million for the state of West Bengal

The Board of Directors of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a financing package totaling \$245 million to provide safe, sustainable, and inclusive drinking water service to about 1.65 million people in three districts of West Bengal state, India, affected by arsenic, fluoride, and salinity.

High arsenic and fluoride levels in drinking water are a threat to public health in India, where West Bengal is by far the worst affected state. Through efficient use of surface water and a shift to piped water schemes, the ADB project will reduce the burden of disease from arsenic and fluoride while preserving groundwater and enhancing climate resilience.

With about 85% of water in India's rural areas coming from groundwater, some 27 million people are at risk from arsenic and fluoride contamination. Arsenic in drinking water can lead to a range of problems including cancer, while high exposure to fluoride can cause dental or skeletal fluorosis and bone diseases.

In West Bengal, more than 90% of the rural population relies on groundwater, making it home to about 72% of India's population at risk from arsenic and 5% of the population at risk from fluoride contamination. Increased withdrawal of groundwater also leaves the area more vulnerable to climate change and disasters, especially regular flooding, and is causing an intrusion of salinity into the water.

The project will provide continuous potable water through metered connections to about 390,000 individual households in three districts—Bankura, North 24 Parganas, and Purba Medinipur. Water will be provided through bulk water systems, consisting of intakes, water treatment plants, and transmission mains that will be connected to a grid with existing and new systems in the project districts. The project will use a high-technology based smart water management system to efficiently manage services—a first for large scale rural water schemes in India. Similar to most states in India, piped water supply in West Bengal's rural areas has been provided through shared public stand-posts to date.

To ensure sustainability of services, the state has adopted an innovative asset management and service delivery framework for the project, clearly defining roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders, including that of the state-level entity for bulk water operation and of the project Gram Panchayats for distribution management. The capacity of institutions and stakeholders involved in delivering drinking water services will be extensively strengthened by the project. The project will also carry out awareness campaigns on water, sanitation, and hygiene; and promote water and sanitation safety

planning.

Besides a reduced health toll, the project will contribute to poverty reduction and an overall improvement in the quality of life. For example, it will reduce the drudgery faced by women and girls, leaving them time for more productive work or schooling. With about 350 jobs expected to be generated by the project, about a third will go to women.

The total project cost is \$349 million, for which ADB will provide a loan of \$240 million and grant of \$3 million from the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction, financed by the Government of Japan. The West Bengal government will provide \$106 million in funding. ADB will also administer a \$2 million grant from the Urban Climate Change Resilience Trust Fund. This will support the state government in strengthening its smart water management system, improve flood-related early warning and response, and provide training on operation and maintenance as well as climate change and disaster resilience. The project is due for completion in June 2024.

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Warm regards,

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