WOTR
Rejuvenating Communities & Ecosystems

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Building Resilient Futures

WATER GOVERNANCE STANDARD

MAKING WATER EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

A Toolkit for Making Rural India Water Smart

Catalysing Water-Secure & Resilient Communities

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Why the Water Governance Standard Required?

Water is a critical driver of economic growth and essential for human welfare and ecosystem health. India is the world's largest consumer of groundwater, with agriculture accounting for nearly 85% of freshwater use and about two-thirds of extractable groundwater already being exploited. This unsustainable extraction has resulted in steadily declining groundwater levels, which become most visible during summer months through acute water shortages. Rural women often travel long distances or wait in queues for water, while many towns resort to water rationing to manage scarcity.

Groundwater management in India faces two persistent challenges: limited motivation and incentives for communities to adopt water-smart practices, and the absence of systems that reveal water-related investment opportunities and risks. Climate change is further intensifying these challenges, making sustainable water use an urgent priority.

While governments, corporates, and civil society organisations have invested significantly in augmenting water supply, far less attention has been given to demand management and water governance. In an increasingly climate-vulnerable context, strengthening social, political, and economic systems for sustainable water management is essential, along with fostering an attitudinal shift among water users to achieve a balance between demand and supply. Effective water governance is central to building long-term water resilience.

This raises a critical question: what benchmarks or yardsticks exist to assess water resource development, management, and governance across scales—from villages and watersheds to blocks, regions, and states? Several frameworks address this partially. For instance, NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index (CWMI) evaluates water management performance at the state level, while the Alliance for Water Stewardship (AWS) Standard assesses and certifies water stewardship practices of industries and businesses. However, until recently, no standard existed to assess water management and governance performance at the village and Gram Panchayat level—the lowest administrative unit in India.

India's Growing Water Stress

- India hosts 18% of the world's population but has only 4% of global freshwater resources.
- Over 600 million Indians face high to extreme water stress (NITI Aayog).
- Per capita freshwater availability has declined by 70% since Independence.
- Agriculture uses 85% of freshwater, over 60% from groundwater — making India the largest groundwater user globally.

The Crisis in Dryland India

- 70% of India's landmass lies in rainfed, drought-prone regions.
- Groundwater depletion, erratic rainfall, and poor demand management worsen scarcity.
- Despite major supply-side investments, little focus has been given on how water is governed and used at the village and Gram Panchayat level.

The Need of the Hour

- To achieve water security, equity, and sustainability, India must move beyond supply augmentation towards effective water governance and behaviour change of all types of water users.
- This requires clear benchmarks to assess water governance at the village level, promotion of healthy competition among villages through systems of certification and incentivisation, and at the same time the establishment of a robust decision-support system for donors, investors, and governments to enable them making informed choices while prioritising water-related investments.

The Water Governance Standard: A Transformative Framework

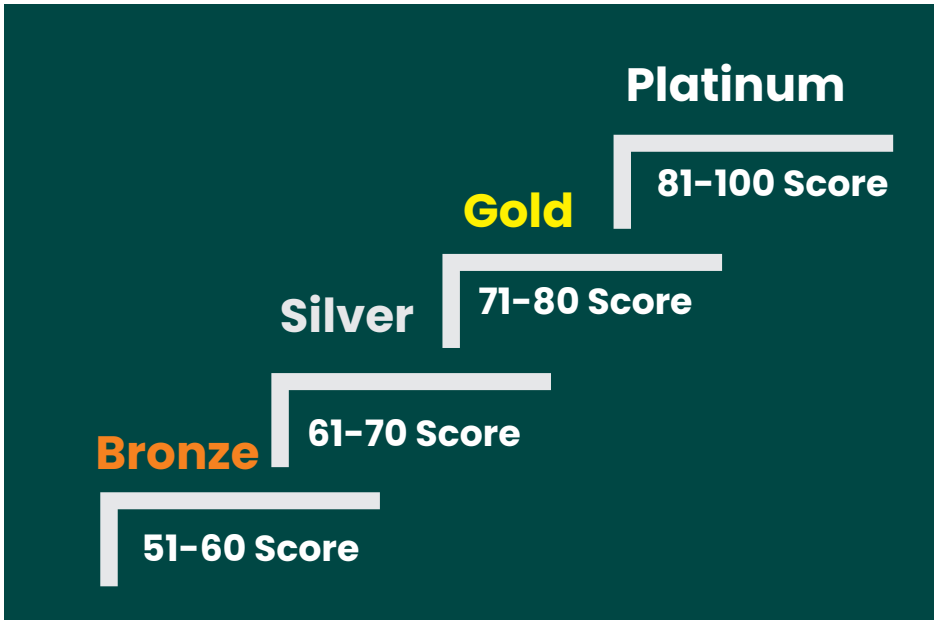
In response to this, the Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR), and WOTR Centre for Resilience Studies (W-CReS), has developed the Water Governance Standard (WGS). It is a rating and certification methodology designed to incentivise and guide both village communities and investors toward water-smart behaviour and decision-making. The WGS assesses how effectively rural communities manage and govern their available water resources and assigns them a "water score".

In WGS, a modular approach has been adopted for certification. The four modules stated below (refer table 1) consider different aspects and dimensions of water management and governance at village level across water-stressed regions of India. Each of the 4 modules consist of various components and sub-components which are divided further into assessment criteria. Each criterion has a description of its purpose and reason, as well as indicators, and scoring.

Table 1: Modules and Scoring system

Modules	Number of Componets	Number of Sub-Componets	Number of Assessment Criteria	Number of Indicators	Scoring Point
1. Governance and Institutions	4	5	14	16	28
2. Supply-side Water Management	4	9	27	43	36
3. Demand-Side Water Management	3	4	10	15	26
4. Sustainability and Equity	2	5	7	11	10
Total	13	23	58	85	100

- On basis of the water score the villages receive, they are rated at four levels



Objectives of the WGS

- By providing clear action plans based on assessment, linking progress in water management to preferential access to investments and benefits, the WGS encourages communities to adopt water-smart attitudes and behaviours and promote the competitive environment in villages to improve their level of water governance.
- WGS rating and ranking of villages provides investors (private and public) the decision support system to make the informed decision in prioratising their investment and assess effectiveness of investments made by them in community-led water management projects.
- The goal of WGS is to foster healthy competition among rural communities, revealing promising water investment opportunities that can deliver lasting social, environmental, and economic benefits.
- WGS envisions rural communities not merely as water users, but as proactive managers & stewards of reliable, accessible, and sustainable water services.
- It promotes the idea that communities can plan, govern, and sustain their own water systems when empowered with knowledge, tools, and supportive institutional frameworks.

The Target group and Actors

In this approach, investors, financiers, and resource providers — including government agencies, corporates, donors, and philanthropies — play a facilitating and enabling role by providing the technical and financial support needed to achieve sustainable results and long-term water security.

Target Groups:

- Rural communities and Gram Panchayats
- Government departments and agencies
- Corporate (CSR) and private investors
- Social investors, donors, and philanthropies
- Development practitioners, researchers, and evaluators

Geographic Focus

- The WGS is best suited for rainfed and groundwater-dependent regions, where communities rely heavily on limited and variable water resources for drinking, agriculture, and livelihoods.

- **Developed by WOTR and W-CReS, the WGS aims to:**

    - **Incentivise** communities to adopt water-smart practices.
    - **Guide** investors and government agencies to target funds effectively.
    - **Benchmark** villages on water governance and management.

Who Uses It ?

Benefits of Adopting WGS

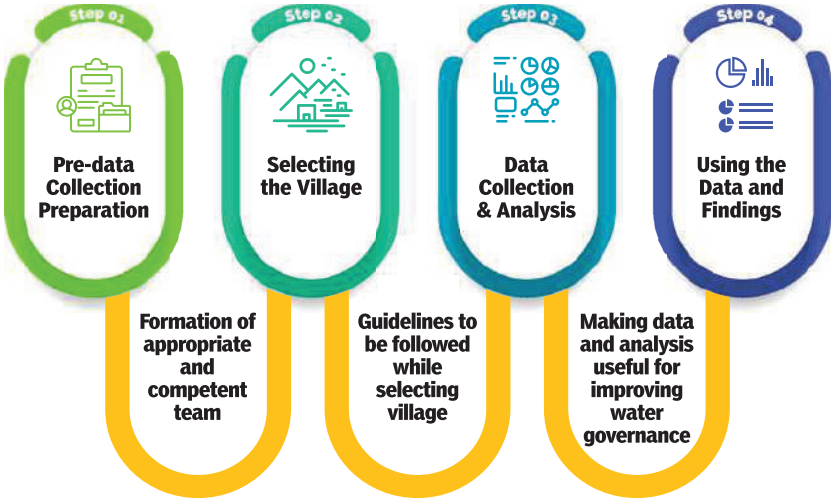
- **Communities:**
  Assess, plan, and attract resources.

- **Investors:**
  Identify high-impact, low-risk investments.

- **Governments/Donors:**
  Evaluate performance and ensure accountability.

- **Researchers/Practitioners:**
  Use evidence to refine design and policy.

Assessment Steps:



From Concept to Action: WGS in Practice

- WGS is developed by extensive consultations with water experts and testing in 94 villages spread across three Indian states, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Jharkhand.
- Water Supply and Sanitation Department (WSSD) of Government of Maharashtra and WOTR signed MOU to promote the Water Governance Standard in the State.
- As part of the MOU, WGS was piloted in Dharashiv an aspirational district in Maharashtra in 2025, in Competition mode, in coordination with the district administration. Total 256 villages participated in the assessment and top three villages were awarded at a high level ceremony held at the district level.
- A 256 Gram Panchayats voluntarily enrolled and were assessed using a 100-point WGS scorecard with Winners were awarded on World Environment Day 2025.
- All assessed villages were provided with the action plan based on the assessment to improve their water governance and taking collective actions.
- The initiative revived collective action, competition for better governance, and public accountability in water management.
- The initiative generated strong enthusiasm among district authorities and communities. The details of the campaign and award ceremony are available at https://youtu.be/KVyYj_-NSUs.
- WOTR has adopted WGS and is being applied in many implementation projects in different Indian State. Till date, the WGS based competition is applied in 606 villages in different Indian states, covering 332 in Maharashtra. 200 in Rajasthan, 34 in Madhya Pradesh, 30 in Jharkhand, and 10 in Telangana.
- Looking at the huge potential of WGS, WOTR and W-CReS are in the process of developing an independent online application and dashboard with multilingual support to Streamline data collection and outputs.

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Prize Distribution Ceremony in Baran District (Rajasthan)

Prize Distribution Ceremony in Dharashiv District (Maharashtra)

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Policy Relevance and the Way Forward
Why WGS Matters for Policy and Practices

- WOTR has customised the WGS for Water User Associations (WUAs) and revised the existing competition framework of the Water Resources Department (WRD), Government of Maharashtra. The revised framework has been formally adopted through a Government Resolution (GR) and is now being implemented across more than 6,000 WUAs in the state.

- A similar modular WGS-based approach has been developed to strengthen Operation and Maintenance (O&M) of drinking water schemes under the Jal Jeevan Mission, which has been adopted by the Water Supply and Sanitation Department, Maharashtra.

- Drawing on WGS learnings, WOTR and W-CReS have submitted a revised competition framework for application under the Atal Bhujal Programme to the Groundwater Survey and Development Agency (GSDA).

- The Water Governance Standard (WGS) offers a scalable, transparent, and measurable framework to track water governance performance and can be embedded within state and national programmes—such as PMKSY-WSD (IWMP), Atal Bhujal, Jal Jeevan Mission, and the National Water Mission—for monitoring, recognition, and incentivisation.

- WGS complements the Composite Water Management Index (CWMI) by extending governance assessment beyond the state level to districts, blocks, villages, and Gram Panchayats.

- The framework enables governments to identify “low-hanging fruits”, prioritise interventions, and promote sustained behavioural change among water users.

- WOTR and W-CReS are committed to promoting WGS through trainings for practitioners, CSR actors, investors, and government officials, and by advancing the framework through national and international publications, platforms, and policy consultations

- Scan the QR Code for free download the WGS Tooll 

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