



महाराष्ट्र शासन



**WOTR**  
Rejuvenating Communities & Ecosystems



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Building Resilient Futures

# COMPETITION FRAMEWORK FOR WATER USERS ASSOCIATIONS



Developed jointly by **Water Resource Department**  
& **WOTR** for **Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar**  
Water Users Competition in Maharashtra

## Background : Evolution of Irrigation Management & Water User Associations (WUAs) in India

Since the Independence, India has built substantial capacity for surface water storage through the construction of large dams—often described as the “Temples of Modern India.” These structures were envisioned as engines of national development, supporting multiple uses such as irrigation, drinking water supply, hydropower, and industry. Among these, irrigation emerged as one of the most critical functions, particularly in rain-fed and drought-prone regions where dependable water access is limited.

Canal-based irrigation systems, though historically present, expanded significantly with the development of large irrigation projects. However, conventional centralised irrigation management systems gradually proved inadequate to address the growing complexity, scale, and operational challenges of these systems. This led to the emergence of Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) as an alternative and more sustainable approach. PIM is rooted in the principle of decentralisation, advocating the active involvement of water-using farmers in the planning, operation, and maintenance of irrigation systems. Having more than 40% of India's dams constructed in Maharashtra, the Government of Maharashtra has been a national leader in institutionalising PIM, particularly through the promotion and strengthening of Water User Associations (WUAs).

WUAs serve as the cornerstone of community participation in irrigation management. They play a vital role in water allocation, equitable distribution, conflict resolution, infrastructure operation and maintenance, and collective decision-making within the command area. Recognising their importance, the Government of Maharashtra enacted the Maharashtra Management of Irrigation Systems by Farmers Act, 2005, providing a strong legal framework for the formation and functioning of WUAs. The Act aims to enhance agricultural productivity through efficient use of surface and groundwater while empowering farmers to manage irrigation systems collectively.

## Urgent Need for Transforming WUAs:

Although formed at huge scale in Maharashtra, strengthening, empowering, and motivating Water User Associations (WUAs) is essential due to increasing water stress, high rainfall variability, and growing competition for limited water resources. The state's large and complex canal irrigation systems cannot be managed effectively through centralised approaches alone. Strong WUAs help ensure equitable and timely water distribution, particularly to tail-end farmers, while reducing conflicts and improving coordination at the local level. By taking ownership of operation and maintenance, empowered WUAs enhance system efficiency, reduce water losses, and contribute to improved agricultural productivity through better water-use practices and informed crop planning.

Motivated and capable WUAs also play a crucial role in strengthening the financial and institutional sustainability of irrigation systems. Improved collection of water charges, transparent financial management, and collective decision-making reduce dependence on government support. At the same time, locally rooted institutions are better equipped to respond to climate variability, droughts, and extreme events. Farmer participation builds ownership, accountability, and trust, aligning with the intent of the Maharashtra Management of Irrigation Systems by Farmers Act, 2005, and enabling the scaling of best practices through performance-based incentives and recognition.

## A state-level competition for WUAs by Water Resources Department in Maharashtra

The Water Resources Department (WRD) continues to play a crucial role in overseeing irrigation management and supporting WUAs in Maharashtra. To promote excellence and encourage best practices, WRD has been annually organising the Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar Water Users' Association Award since 2008 in the state. To evaluate the WUAs through competition, the Water Resources Department has formulated guidelines and criteria for the competition, and presents award to those WUAs for doing commendable work every year. The main objectives of this competition are to,

- Systematically evaluate and classify WUAs based on PIM principles
- Foster a culture of healthy competition among WUAs to improve irrigation governance
- Acknowledge, incentivise and motivate high-performing WUAs and committed departmental staff

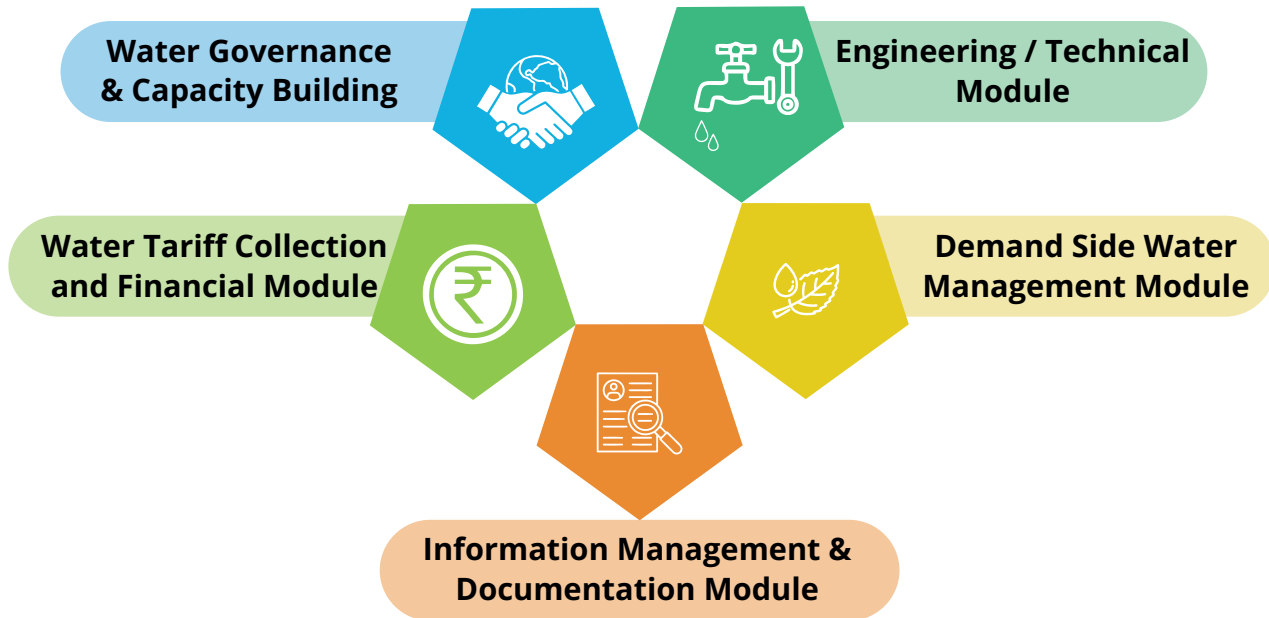
## WOTR's Role in Strengthening the Assessment Framework:

To expand the scope and strengthen the effectiveness of the Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar Water Users' Association Award, the Water Resources Department (WRD) entered into a MoU with the WOTR. WOTR has developed the Water Governance Standard (WGS)—a comprehensive framework for assessing and improving water governance practices at the local level. Recognising this expertise, WRD and WOTR jointly agreed to modify and strengthen the award guidelines and ranking methodology using the WGS framework. The MoU, signed between WRD and WOTR on 12 March 2024, seeks to reinforce Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) by establishing a standardised, performance-based, and improvement-oriented assessment system that encourages accountability and sustained institutional performance of WUAs across Maharashtra. WOTR with WRD developed and tested the WUA framework in different regions of the state and finally it is accepted by the WRD by issuing the Government Resolution, dated 24 April 2025 (with index no. 202504241534084227). Now, this revised framework is being applied through the annual competition for more than 6000 WUAs in the state.

**Photo : WOTR Team while discussing with the Principal Secretary, WRD & his Team**



## The Competition Framework



WOTR, along with its research wing—the Centre for Resilience Studies (W-CReS)—worked closely with the Water Resources Department (WRD) to modify the existing WUA competition framework. The Directorate of Irrigation Research and Development (DIRD) played a crucial role in coordination and input in revising the competition framework and guidelines. The revised framework is specifically designed to motivate WUAs, foster a healthy competitive environment, and enable continuous improvement in their performance.

## The revised competition framework is structured into five below modules:

Module	Distribution of Marks			
	Self-Assessment by WUA	Regional Evaluation Committee	State Evaluation Committee	Total Marks
Module 1 Water Governance & Capacity Building	45	6	4	60
Module 2 Engineering / Technical Module	25	6	4	30
Module 3 Water Tariff Collection and Financial Module	30	6	4	40
Module 4 Demand Side Water Management Module	25	6	4	30
Module 5 Information Management & Documentation Module	25	6	4	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>150</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>200</b>

The WUA assessment system under the competition get conducted at three levels, with a total of 200 marks. The first level consists of an online application and self-assessment submitted on the WRD portal, carrying 150 marks. WUAs scoring 75 marks or above get rated as Silver, Gold, or Platinum level based on their score and only they get qualify for preliminary selection. These certified lists get submitted by Executive Engineers to the Regional Superintending Engineer. The second level, conducted by the Regional Evaluation Committee, carries 40 marks and involves scrutiny, shortlisting of the top 10 WUAs in each category, and field verification. The third and final level is a state-level evaluation, where the committee awards up to 10 additional marks based on overall performance and their observations, leading to the final award selection.

The modified WUA competition framework adopts a modular and structured approach, allowing for objective and transparent evaluation of WUAs. Beyond assessment and ranking, the framework systematically identifies strengths and gaps at the WUA level and provides clear, actionable guidance for strengthening water governance and improving overall institutional performance based on assessment outcomes.

## Categories of WUA Awards

**The awards for the annual competition are presented for two groups:**

- (1) Major and medium irrigation projects: WUAs operating in the command areas of major and medium irrigation projects, where multiple WUAs typically exist; and
- (2) A single WUA projects: WUAs operating in the command areas of minor irrigation projects, Kolhapur-type weirs, lift irrigation schemes, storage tanks, and similar projects, where usually only one WUA exists per project.

### Awards Amount

<b>State level Awards:</b>	First Prize : Rs. 5.00 lakh and a Certificate of Appreciation
4 Awards (First and Second Prize in both groups (1 and 2))	Second Prize : Rs. 3.00 lakh and a Certificate of Appreciation
<b>Regional Level Awards :</b>	First Prize : Rs. 2.00 lakh and a Certificate of Appreciation
20 awards (First and Second Prize in both groups for five regions of the state)	Second Prize : Rs. 1.00 lakh and a Certificate of Appreciation

In addition, to appreciate and motivate Assistant Engineers and officers of lower rank, as well as irrigation staff, who carries outstanding work in irrigation management and strengthening of Water Users Associations, also get awarded certificates.

## Policy Relevance and benefits of adopting the Framework.

- The revised WUA competition framework and guidelines, jointly developed by WOTR and the Water Resources Department (WRD), have been formally adopted through a Government Resolution (GR) issued by the Government of Maharashtra and are currently being implemented across more than 6,000 Water User Associations (WUAs) in the state.
- The WUA competition framework provides an objective, transparent, and measurable methodology to assess, rate, and rank WUAs based on their institutional functioning and performance. The framework has significant potential for replication and adaptation in other states to support Command Area Development (CAD) and promote Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM).
- The statewide assessment, rating, and ranking of WUAs through the competition (for example, covering over 6,000 WUAs in Maharashtra) generates a rich and comprehensive dataset on the strengths, gaps, and opportunities across WUAs. The availability of this data on an annual basis provides evidence-based inputs to inform investment-related decisions, prioritise focus areas, and target specific regions for improved water resources management.
- The competition-based assessment framework enables government departments and supporting agencies to identify priority areas requiring targeted interventions, capacity building, and institutional strengthening.
- The framework also helps governments identify “low-hanging fruit,” prioritise interventions, and promote sustained behavioural change among irrigation farmers organised under Water User Associations.
- WOTR and its research wing, W-CReS, are committed to promoting the WUA competition framework and guidelines through capacity-building trainings for practitioners, CSR actors, and government officials, as well as by advancing the framework through national and international publications, platforms, and policy consultations.
- The Guideline/GR and video for nomination to the Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar Water User Association Award is available on the website of the Water Resources Department of Maharashtra. These can be accessed through the following link and QR code





## Water Experts in the State with WOTR team



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## **Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR)**

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