Town Action Plans of Uttarakhand – The future of Sanitation

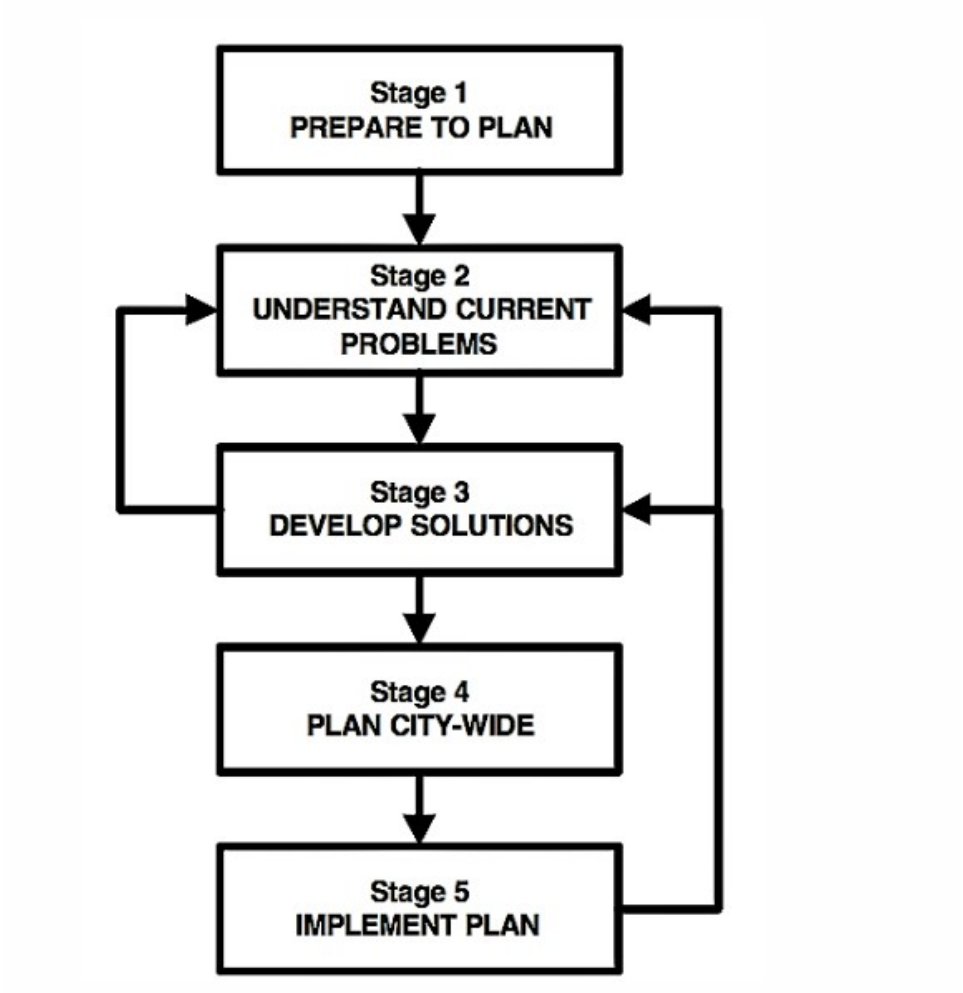
Mains: *GS I - Urbanization, their problems and their remedies*

Why in News?

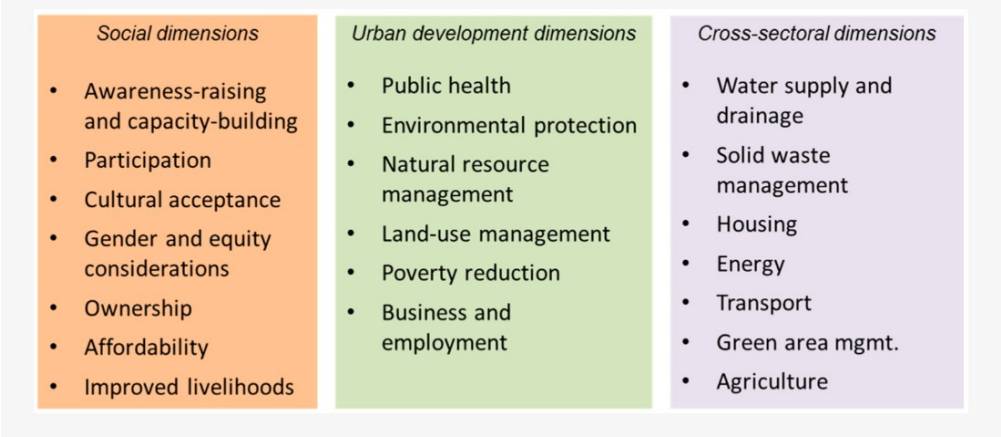
Recently, nearly 100 Urban Local Bodies (ULB), in uttarakhand , prepared their first structured town action plans (TAP) for faecal sludge, septage and used water management during district-wise workshops conducted by think tank National Institute of Urban Affairs (NIUA).

What is the town action plan on sanitation?

- **Town Action Plan on Sanitation** – It is a strategic vision document that outlines *short, medium, and long-term strategies for a town or city to improve its sanitation service*s and achieve universal, safe, and sustainable sanitation for its residents.
- It is a strategic, step-by-step document that outlines how a town or community will address specific issues, implement projects, and achieve its goals.
- **Strategy**



- **Dimensions**



What are the patterns behind key terms of a TAP?

- **Frequency of key terms** – To decode these plans, we examined the frequency of key terms words that recurred across towns and districts.
- Each keyword corresponds to tangible activities, allowing us to measure intent and scale.

Frequency of key terms recurring across TAPs

Keyword	Frequency
IEC (Messaging to users and workshops for masons and desludging operators)	89
Registration (of desludging vehicles/operators in the Municipal area)	80
Monitoring (Monitoring framework of desludging activities)	80
Survey (Create database of locations and types of containment system throughout the city)	73
GPS (Installing GPS tracking on Cesspool vehicles)	70
Safety (Ensuring workplace safety of sanitation workers)	54
Procurement (of Cesspool vehicles)	49
Behaviour (Community BCC for regular/timely desludging)	49
Site (Site identification and selection of treatment infrastructure)	39
Upgrade	38
Training (Capacity building of stakeholder at municipal level)	28
Coordination (with Jal Sansthan, Jal Nigam and UDD for seamless service delivery and fulfil the town requirements)	23
Bye-laws (Update the byelaws as per contextual information)	20
DPR (Prepare DPRs for small scale decentralised sanitation projects)	19
Technology (Interested in exploring new technologies in sanitation)	11
Energy	6

- **Emphasis on awareness and interface** – IEC, behaviour change and registration top the list.
- This shows ULBs are thinking not only about infrastructure but also about public service and systems.
- They want citizens to know the rules and operators to be visible and accountable.
- Sanitation is being framed as a service, not a last resort.
- **Towns want visibility and control** – Monitoring, GPS and surveys dominate.
- These are tools of governance, knowing where septic tanks are, who is emptying them, how often and whether it is safe.
- **Administration is getting serious about delivery** – Technical terms like site selection, procurement, training, DPR formulation and bye-law updates appear often.
- This reflect awareness of existing gaps and a readiness to plug them through structured planning, formal upgrades and financial foresight.

What are the roles of terrain in developing TAP?

- **Different terrain** – Uttarakhand is not a typical state its irregular terrain, plains, slopes, valleys and ridges dramatically shapes sanitation planning.
- Priorities vary with geography, demography and climate.
- **High-altitude towns –** Settled on slopes and valleys with steep gradients, fractured land parcels and freezing winters, these towns rarely find sewer lines viable.
- Septic tanks are scattered, desludging is seasonal and land for treatment plants is scarce.

    - **For example**, Joshimath, Pithoragarh, Chamoli.
- TAPs here call for detailed household surveys, careful site selection for shared treatment units, strong inter-departmental coordination and behaviour change efforts to adapt sanitation services to such terrain.
- **Mid-altitude towns –** Perched on ridges with dense urban cores, some of these towns already have partial sewer networks.
- Yet desludging is often informal, handled by small operators.
    - **For example,** Almora, Pauri, Tehri
- TAPs focus on bringing order — registering operators, ensuring safe practices, introducing basic monitoring such as vehicle tracking and training to improve both safety and service quality.
- **Plains towns –** With flat terrain and large populations, plains towns face service overloads, unregulated operators and scale challenges.
    - **For example,** Haridwar, Kashipur, Rudrapur
- TAPs here prioritise structured systems, digital platforms for desludging bookings, procurement of more vehicles, public awareness campaigns and cluster-level STPs to manage higher volumes.
- Across altitudes, towns are articulating solutions tailored to context.
- The collective intelligence in these TAPs is a testament to willingness. It signals that towns are ready for a sanitation leap, but they need support to clear the path.

What must be the priorities of the state?

- **Standardisation across the board –** ULBs know what they want, but formats, costing methods and documentation vary.
- Agencies should release standard templates for TAPs (with editable activity libraries), surveys, SOPs for desludging and performance dashboards.
- **Embedded technical handholding –** Terms like DPR, coordination and technology reveal gaps where ULBs need expertise.
- NIUA can provide field cells, engineers and planners who travel across clusters, helping towns finalise designs, contracts and implementation.
- **Funding Linked to Readiness –** ULBs with detailed TAPs, viable costing and inter-departmental coordination should be prioritised for funding.
- A progressive model, releasing funds against verified milestones, can reward initiative and set replicable examples.
- **Behaviour and Worker Safety as Non-Negotiable –** High demand for IEC and safety shows towns want to clean up not just infrastructure but also perceptions and worker dignity.
- This opens doors for awareness campaigns, certification programmes and feedback systems, linked with NAMASTE.
- **Build a Knowledge Loop –** Every activity, from PPE drives to site selection, must be documented.
- A centralised *Sanitation Learning Portal* for Uttarakhand could become the largest repository of mountain sanitation practices, recording both successes and failures.

Why this is a big deal for India?

- **Stresses a tailored approach** – National missions must recognise the need for mountain-specific sanitation approaches.
- **Model for other states** – More than 500 sanitation actions now articulated by Uttarakhand's towns, each shaped by local needs and endorsed by municipal leaders.
- This exercise can be easily replicated across the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR).
- **A source of data** - If formats are standardised, journeys documented, and outcomes tracked, the result will be not just Uttarakhand's progress but a wider repository of terrain-specific solutions for states like Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh.
- **A starting point** – The TAPs of Uttarakhand are not perfect, but they are honest and reflect readiness, ambition, and clarity.
- They Scale is not only about budgets and technologies but also about shared templates, peer learning, and repeatable protocols, and that is what Uttarakhand is poised to offer.

What lies ahead?

- If the state backs this momentum with structured support, and if national agencies turn these TAPs into living documents, India will gain both a robust repository of sanitation practices and a tested roadmap for the IHR, a region that has waited too long to be understood on its own terms.
- These TAPs, created as part of the operationalisation of the state's septage management protocol workshops, reflect something rare in sanitation planning, grounded and well-founded intent.
- With over 500 activities coded and categorised, we now have an extraordinary opportunity to understand where Uttarakhand's towns want to go and what is holding them back.

Reference

Down To Earth| 100 Town Action Plan

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