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LOCAL ACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO IMPROVE AND
SUSTAIN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES

**Water delivery configurations and CBOs in Dhaka's slums,
Bangladesh: lessons for WASH sustainability**

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In Dhaka, Bangladesh over five million bustee (slum) dwellers access water via self-help, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), donors, samity's (cooperative societies), illegal vendors, local leaders, politicians, private landowners and some government agencies. These diverse 'delivery configurations' (Olivier de Sardan 2010; 2011; Jaglin 2014) have implications for WASH sustainability, the terms and cost of access. Drawing on in-depth fieldwork in three bustees, and citywide interviews with NGO and government officials, this paper outlines how NGO-initiated CBOs access legal water connections. Whilst CBOs play an increasingly important role, the extent to which supply (and associated hardware) remains functional, affordable and equitable in this context, is disputed. Findings highlight the importance of a more coordinated and integrated approach to water, sanitation, hygiene and land tenure security, for enhanced WASH sustainability in urban low-income settlements.

Introduction

Although Dhaka is undergoing rapid socio-economic transformation, the urban poor remain chronically neglected in government policy, planning and practice (Banks et al 2011). State 'neglect', unwillingness and/or inability to deliver basic services has resulted in multi-level systems of dependency and patronage, whereby 'highly formalised informal' systems of governance mediate access to services for the majority of Dhaka's *bustee* residents (Banks 2012; Hossain 2013).

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), donors, *samity's* (cooperative societies), illegal vendors, local leaders, politicians, private landowners and some government agencies (notably Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority - DWASA), jostle to fill the service 'gap'. NGOs play a particularly central role, creating CBOs to access legal water connections, collect bills, implement projects and maintain 'hardware' (i.e. tube wells, water tanks and standpoints).

This paper explores the literature on service delivery configurations (Olivier de Sardan 2010; 2011; Jaglin 2014), before focusing on one NGO - DSK (*Dushtha Shasthya Kendra*) and its associated CBOs (or WatSan Committees) in accessing legal water connections in Dhaka. Key policy relevant questions are raised – Can (or should) such diversity be regulated? How can WASH sustainability (in terms of institutions i.e. CBOs and hardware) be enhanced, in a context where the majority of *bustee* residents are tenants, opportunities (financial or otherwise) are still captured by an elite few, and environmental degradation poses major risks to water quality? Findings highlight the importance of analysing the dynamics of water provision, and potential for a more coordinated and integrated approach to service delivery in urban low-income settlements.

Methodology

This paper draws on qualitative fieldwork in three *bustees* and citywide Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted in Dhaka from November 2014 to August 2015. A mixed-qualitative toolkit, including; participant observation, community mapping, Semi-Structured Questionnaires (SSQs), In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) was used in each field site to gather in-depth information about the role of CBOs in water access, 'hardware' construction and maintenance, actions of CBO leaders and

members, and (informal) governance structures within each settlement. The citywide KIIs then contextualised these observations within broader state and civil society discourse, policy and practice around water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

Service delivery configurations

The absence of coordinated state service provision in Dhaka's *bustees* has led to parallel or 'alternative' systems of informal provision, often mediated and controlled by powerful local leaders and *mastaans* (musclemen/women) (Islam et al 2003; Banks 2008; 2012; Panday and Panday 2008; Hossain 2012). As the majority of *bustees* (over 70%) are located on private land, an extensive number of informal private entrepreneurs, landlords and managers also mediate access to housing, water, gas and electricity, charging monthly rent and bills (CUS 2006; Nawaz 2007 in Rahman 2011; Angeles et al 2009; Roy et al 2012).

NGO-initiated CBOs play a particularly important role, and can be found in many of Dhaka's *bustees*. Institutional analysis conducted in one field site revealed five NGOs and three CBOs involved in water and sanitation provision alone, each with a different history and agenda. Whilst NGOs and CBOs come and go, *bustee* committees and *samitys* (consisting of elected and unelected local leaders) oversee service delivery in the long term, raising questions over who benefits. In another field site, NGOs were unable to enter the settlement due to a land dispute and 'anti-NGO' stance of the local committee and *samity* leaders, who controlled the illegal water connections.

In this context, it is clear that highlighting the 'failure' of formal delivery systems alone is unhelpful and misguided. As noted by Jaglin (2014: 434), 'analysing the institutional deficiencies of conventional services, attributing their failures to underinvestment and poor public management' promotes a neoliberal ideology that 'assumes the superiority of private sector models' over alternative services which are 'temporary [and] destined to disappear'. Crucially, such approaches neglect the heterogeneity of service provision within towns and cities in the Global South, where 'services are not delivered within the framework of a uniform and integrated system, but in different ways through a range of provisions' (*ibid*). As service delivery is a dynamic process, we must focus on the 'vitality and multiplicity of actual service delivery systems which contribute to the functioning of cities – informal, formal, self-help, legal, illegal' (*ibid*). Whilst others use nexus thinking (e.g. Thieme and Kovacs 2015), Jaglin applies Olivier de Sardan's (2010; 2011) notion of *delivery configurations* to capture this heterogeneity, whereby service delivery involves a network of actors, tools, knowledge and values (*ibid*). Analysis of these configurations helps to identify key 'bottlenecks' and collective action problems that require different solutions (Olivier de Sardan 2010; 2011).

Water delivery configurations and CBOs

Water delivery configurations have shifted considerably for Dhaka's *bustee* residents over the past 20 years. The quote below provides some insight as to why. The interviewee recounts his story about installing an NGO water point in one *bustee*. At this time (in 1996), water was controlled by an illegal vendor (charging 5 taka per pot approx. 0.06USD) and *mastaans* hired to prevent outside intervention:

"When I started work to install the water point some *mastaans* threatened me... 'you can't do it, why you are doing it, there is water over there!' It took nearly 6-7 months to solve this problem... I negotiated with the councillor and some political persons to minimise this problem... We finally found out, one guy from that community [was] doing this. He told me, 'why are you disturbing me? I am making business but you are disturbing me, I will lose my business!' I told him, 'you are doing illegal business, it will not sustain'. When I mentioned he is doing it illegally he told me, 'no, you will install a water point, you will pay the bill only to WASA, but I pay the bill to WASA, police, journalists, local politicians, *mastaans*... seven categories of people are collecting money from me, so who is legal, you or me?'

(KII DSK Fieldworker 2015)

The quote reveals two key issues. Firstly, that multiple actors and institutions are directly and/or indirectly involved in water delivery, blurring the boundaries between 'legality' and 'illegality'. Secondly, that since the 1990s, NGOs (particularly DSK) have been major players in negotiating for and accessing *legal* water connections from DWASA. Although DWASA conventionally supplies water (only) to households with holding numbers, a significant change in the Citizen Charter in 2007 (as a result of NGO advocacy) meant that *bustee* residents could apply for connections via a CBO. As one DWASA official explained, "*this CBO model occurs because we don't have enough manpower. We need CBOs. One place where we can put*

everything – our bill, or any problem, they will solve it” (KII 2015). Since the 1990s, DSK has mobilised *bustee* residents into CBOs to enable project delivery, and promote ownership over, and sustainability of, infrastructure and services. For the Executive Director, these “*new institutions*” are strategically important as they can negotiate with City Corporation for other services – a process facilitated by DSK (KII 2015). Arguably, NGOs and CBOs have become the ‘new intermediaries’ between *bustee* residents and DWASA, breaking down dependency on illegal vendors.

These new water connections bring revenue for DWASA, but also (seemingly) reduce bills for *bustee* residents. Whilst NGOs and donors finance major investments (e.g. construction materials), CBO members usually contribute a small co-sharing fee for connection, ‘hardware’ construction, and pay the DWASA bills thereafter. The bills, produced according to a metre, vary according to the number of users, but average between 100-200 taka per month, per family (approx. 1.25-2.50 USD). Field surveys and interviews with NGO staff revealed that illegal connections, taken via *mastaans*, local leaders or corrupt DWASA staff, often incurred higher charges, reaching 300-400 taka per month, per family (approx. 3.75-5.00 USD).

For Jaglin (2002:231), such ‘user participation’ represents a market-oriented approach, whereby ‘participation of the poor seems to reflect a compromise between an ambition to provide universal access to water and the principal of cost-recovery’. For Hossain and Ahmed (2014: 9), on the other hand, the DSK approach is a ‘non-conventional model of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) between slum dwellers, CBOs and DWASA’, that ‘used social capital of slum dwellers as a major resource in about 200 slums, enabling approximately 100,000 poor slum dwellers to gain legal access to public water supply’ (*ibid*: 1). Whilst this is a significant achievement in a context of ‘neglect’, fieldwork identified numerous ‘bottlenecks’, elaborated below.

Implications for WASH sustainability

Whilst the shift from illegal to legal water provision appears above as a linear process (from the 1990s to today), the notion of service delivery configurations reminds us it is no such thing. In reality, illegal vendors, *mastaans*, local leaders and landlords still mediate access to water for *bustee* residents, and many are CBO leaders (or members) themselves. Evidence from one field site demonstrates this complexity. As one resident explains, “*They [local leaders] have taken control of the DSK water point, and are selling it at 100 taka per month*” (IDI 2015). Even though this water point was designated for 30 user families, one local leader began selling to another 100 families, resulting in water shortages and long queues. It later emerged that the same person was a member of the WatSan Committee. Whilst this is neither inherently bad nor unexpected, it’s important to recognise that once NGOs like DSK phase out, local power struggles ensue over CBO (leadership), maintenance and ownership of ‘hardware’, with implications for bill collection/payment to DWASA, quality and sustainability of supply.

The following outlines four key reflections from Dhaka, with implications for WASH sustainability:

- Firstly, as indicated above, CBOs are grounded in complex service delivery configurations, involving legal/illegal, formal/informal, government/non-government actors and institutions from ‘pump to pot’. This reinforces Jaglin’s (2014: 437) notion that configurations, although networked, are ‘anchored in urban contexts, and shaped by local power struggles’.
- Secondly, many *bustees* are on private land, where there may be little scope for CBO formation, as outside intervention and internal organisation is deterred by landlords, managers or local leaders. In addition, DWASA prioritises *bustees* on public (government) land. As one DWASA official remarked, “*private land slums stay for two years, maximum. After that they just move the slums and build a huge apartment*” (KII 2015).
- Thirdly, rapid urbanisation and the scale of environmental degradation in Dhaka means that providing *quality*, safe water is, and will be, a major technical and financial challenge. This is problematic given that DWASA, NGOs (like DSK) and CBOs are heavily reliant on donor funding. CBOs play an increasingly central role in water provision but have limited financial autonomy, meaning they cannot afford large-scale hardware repairs, and often disband post-project.
- Fourthly, lack of coordination and accountability among and between those involved in water access, delivery and consumption pose challenges for DWASAs vision of *Shobar Jonno Pani* (‘Water for All’), and achieving Sustainable Development Goal (No.6). This supports Jaglin’s (2014:442) conclusion that ‘institutions have failed to keep up with the emergence of [diverse] delivery configurations and their socio-technical mix, reflected in: little or no regulation, little or no solidarity, little or no coordination between service providers and between services’.

Lessons for WASH sustainability

Whilst the Government of Bangladesh is ultimately responsible to provide safe water and hygienic sanitation to all, unwillingness or inability to act (due to lack of funds and human resources), lack of coordination and accountability has implications for sustained, affordable and equitable access to water in Dhaka's *bustees*. The legalisation of water via the DSK-DWASA-CBO model is highly commendable, yet the shift from illegal to legal supply is not straightforward. NGO-initiated CBOs and NGO staff must continually negotiate with legal/illegal, formal/informal, government/non-government and public/private actors and institutions to obtain and maintain services. The following outlines some key policy lessons for WASH sustainability in this context.

Firstly, for CBO sustainability; targeting tenants (a neglected group), greater financial autonomy (e.g. group savings), incentives for continued participation and personal development, peer learning and exchanges, self-management and leadership training, continuity and flexibility from NGOs and donors (to meet community demands, retain staff) and longer, as opposed to shorter projects can enhance institutional capacity. Registration of CBOs as NGOs or cooperatives, and facilitating the formation of citywide and national urban poor federations, is a further step forward in encouraging sustainability.

Secondly, for hardware sustainability; provision of low-cost, low-tech solutions, cleaning rotas or paying cleaners/managers, community contracting, needs-based assessments, adapting to changing preferences (e.g. from tube wells to in-house taps), investment and linking to central water systems (e.g. government networks) and most importantly, addressing tenure insecurity.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that 'context matters', with significant variation of experience between and within *bustees* (relating to one's class, gender, status, income, occupancy, religion, age and so on). For example, tenants may not wish to invest in water infrastructure for fear of rent increase brought about by improved services. Women and young girls, as the primary water collectors, may suffer with back and neck problems after using inappropriate technology (e.g. rusted tube wells). Land topography and seasonal variation can result in water shortages during summer, and water points, pipes, pots being submerged by dirty flood waters during monsoon. It is important that any WASH intervention unpacks this complexity and focuses on *who controls* and *mediates* services pre- and post-intervention. An integrated and coordinated approach to services (e.g. water, waste, sanitation, energy) and land tenure security is central for long-term WASH sustainability.

Notes

'Formal' systems not only refer to state-led institutions and/or initiatives. In turn, we must acknowledge that some state institutions (such as DWASA) play a proactive role in service provision.

'The delivery configuration of a good is the totality of actors and institutions, and of equipment and resources, which contribute to the delivery of its various components, under some form or other of co-production: collaboration (direct or indirect, episodic or permanent), substitution, competition, complementarity...associated with specific kinds of accountabilities' (Olivier de Sardan 2010: 5-6).

DSK also facilitated the formation of a city-wide network of CBOs - NBUS (*Nogor Bostibashi Unnyan Sangstha* or 'Urban Slum Development Agency') to fight for the right to water, sanitation, shelter and tenure security. See Cawood (2015) for more details: <http://www.mei.edu/content/map/filling-gap-or-digging-void-role-ngo-initiated-cbos-service-delivery-dhaka-bangladesh>

During interview, one DWASA Official estimated the number of connections to be 2174 in approximately 400 *bustees*. It's important to note that there can be multiple connections in one settlement, hence the higher number.

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