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**TRANSFORMATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE
AND RESILIENT WASH SERVICES**

**How can NGOs support local government institutions
to sustain sanitation? Case studies from Bangladesh**

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Bangladesh has seen remarkable progress in sanitation coverage in recent decades. This paper looks at the sustainability of sanitation services at the grassroots level and how local government institutions have been involved or influenced to be active in addressing sanitation needs. Two Union Parishads in Bangladesh are taken as case studies to examine how NGOs have engaged with local government, what has been most effective for contributing to sustainability from local government and community perspectives and the available evidence for sustainability. Results show that local government institutions can generate sustained change with support from community-led approaches. The most effective elements of NGO support include activating a system of committees, generating a community-led social movement and the provision of information. The evidence for sustainability is promising, including continued use of hygienic sanitation facilities, increases in local government budget allocations for WASH and demand for improved services.

Introduction

Bangladesh has undergone a sanitation ‘revolution’ in recent decades, with a rapid growth in the construction and use of sanitary household latrines. Increases in “at least basic” sanitation from 25% in 2000 to 47% in 2015 and a reduction in open defecation from 18 to zero percent (UNICEF & WHO 2017) are major achievements. Change has been initiated by Government and development partner programmes, notably the Government campaign of 2003-2006 (Hanchett, 2016) and the Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) approach, developed and widely applied in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2011).

Research efforts have more recently been focused on the sustainability of these achievements. The long-term sustainability of improved sanitation in Bangladesh was the topic of a World Bank study (Hanchett *et al.* 2011) showing that social attitudes towards sanitation have significantly changed, but maintaining open defecation free areas and the sustained maintenance and use of sanitary latrines remains a challenge. This is due in part to high levels of poverty, poor quality latrine construction materials (slabs and pre-cast concrete rings) and environmental shocks such as floods.

Local Government Institutions (LGIs) have the key role to play in sustaining sanitation improvements, having the statutory responsibility and necessary flow of resources, and being a permanent presence while other actors may come and go. The question of how to build capacity at the appropriate administrative levels is therefore vitally important. Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) often partner or collaborate with local government to achieve sanitation transformation and contribute to building their capacity.

This study focuses on two rural Union Parishads (UP or Union) in Bangladesh, one with Plan International Bangladesh (PIB) and one with Village Education Resource Centre (VERC), supported by WaterAid Bangladesh (WAB). All were implementing the DFID-funded South Asia WASH Results Programme (SAWRP) from 2014 to 2018.

SAWRP is funded through a Payment by Results mechanism, with donor payments made on the basis of independently verified results. The results framework consists of output and outcome indicators which measure improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene. In Bangladesh, 735,405 people gained access to basic or improved household latrines as a result of the programme. The outcomes indicators measure the

continued use of these latrines, one aspect of sustainability. Outcome results indicate high levels of continued use and functionality at household level after two years.

Bangladesh has a well-developed NGO sector with recognised excellence in development and practice of participatory methodologies such as community situation analysis (including community mapping and wellbeing ranking) and community-led total sanitation which were used by the NGOs in SAWRP.

This research presents local government and community perspectives on what NGO approaches have been most effective in generating the capacity and motivation to sustain sanitation improvements. In the context of the wider research question “How can development partners (NGOs) work effectively with local governments to lead to sustainable sanitation services?” we consider in specific case studies how NGOs have engaged with local government, and how this has contributed to the sustainability of sanitation.

Methodology

This paper draws on case studies in two UPs¹ (Goaldihi Union, where PIB has been working, and Dhamainagor Union, where WAB/VERC have been working), conducted at the end of SAWRP activities in February 2018. The UPs were selected where the respective NGOs had been working in all nine wards of the UP and taking into account ease of access for the research team within time and security constraints.

The research team consisted of staff from the SAWRP Country Coordination Unit, a researcher from the Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC), Loughborough University and members of the field teams from the implementing organisations (WAB, PIB and VERC). While there is a possibility that the presence of project staff could have influenced responses, it was their relationships with local government officials and committees that facilitated the research and it was felt by the research team that this led to higher levels of trust and openness than the reverse, and allowed access that would otherwise not have been possible. We also took into account in the analysis a strong undertone of gratitude towards PIB from the people of Goaldihi Union, which may translate to some level of bias in the investigation. Quantitative data from the Community Situation Analysis (CSA) and UP Annual Development budgets were collected and analysed to triangulate results.

In total, seven semi-structured interviews and focus groups were carried out in Goaldihi Union and nine in Dhamainagor Union. Participants included the Union Chairman and Secretary, Ward members, Women’s representatives, Ward WATSAN committee members, Community Health Workers or Community volunteers who had been involved in hygiene promotion, Natural Leaders or Cluster WASH Action Committee members who were key figures in their local communities and local sanitation entrepreneurs who had worked with the project. From the NGO staff, the person who had spent most time in the Union was interviewed. A total of 32 men and 12 women participated in this research.

Interview protocol including explaining the voluntary nature of the research, confidentiality of the data, right to withdraw and informed consent was followed in all cases. Permission was requested for interviews to be recorded for transcription purposes. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the Loughborough University sub-committee (Human Participants). Interviews were transcribed and coded for themes.

Local government structures in Bangladesh

Here we provide brief key points about local government structures in Bangladesh, as they relate to sanitation. In rural areas, the Union Parishad is the lowest tier of government. On average a UP has a population of 20-40,000 people and is divided into nine wards. Each Ward can be further sub-divided into villages or *para* (communities/clusters). An elected Union Chairman, nine elected ward members and three elected women’s members comprise the UP Council. A Union Secretary is the civil servant overseeing administrative affairs for the UP, and 9-10 Village Police complete the human resources.

UPs have the mandate to ensure good sanitation and Union Parishad Development Planning Rules 2013 made provision to spend at least 15% to 20% of the Union Parishad development budget on water and sanitation². There are two distinct institutional processes (other than non-government support) for sanitation:

- WASH Standing Committee: One of 13 standing committees defined by Local Government (Union Parishad Act of 2009)
- WATSAN Committees: Mandated by government circular on Water Supply and Sanitation from the Local Government Division of Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives in 2004 at District, Sub-district, Union and Ward levels.

Each of these committees has defined roles and responsibilities, which are in cases overlapping. Both of these processes at the Union level involve the elected officials of the Union Parishad (Chairman and/or Council members).

Summary of what the NGOs did and engagement with local government

The implementing NGOs used different approaches for partnering with UPs, though both developed strong collaborative partnerships. In Goaldihi, PIB partnered directly with the UP, providing them with funds to recruit staff to carry out project activities. The key position of Facilitator for the Union was therefore technically a UP employee, answerable to the Chairman, though line-managed on a day-to-day basis by a PIB supervisor. In Dhamainagor, VERC implemented activities directly with involvement of the UP with WAB in a technical backstopping role. The Facilitator was a VERC staff member although based in the UP office and the UP committee members were involved in programmatic activities but with no direct transfer of funds.

Rapport-building with local government staff was a major focus of project staff. VERC Facilitators described how they initially approached the UP officials to introduce the project and build rapport. After informal communications a workshop was arranged to demonstrate formal approval from the UP. As PIB began working in Goaldihi in 1994 and already had a long-standing relationship of more than 24 years such an introductory phase was less important.

Aside from giving approval and support for the project, elected Union Parishad ward members and women's representatives were heavily involved in SAWRP activities, as members/chairpersons/advisors of the WATSAN Committees and Union Parishad Standing Committees, especially during the planning, execution and monitoring periods. They were not only elected representatives but also opinion makers and influential people who motivated people to change behaviour. "Activating" the UP WASH standing committee, Union and Ward WATSAN committees involved a lot of time "sitting together" with project staff to resolve issues, motivate action as well as providing awareness training on water, sanitation and hygiene to members. While these structures are government-prescribed, they are often non-existent or dormant without the input of an external catalyst. The result of this high level of involvement of elected members was greater ownership of the systems and structures in place.

In the communities, the NGOs followed an established two-day participatory process within individual *paras*, with the ward member attending some of the time. Beginning with a community meeting and transect walk a Facilitator led a discussion of the present situation, concluding by drawing a map of the community showing individual households, latrines and tubewells. A wellbeing ranking was also conducted with the criteria defined by the community. The poorest and most vulnerable identified were then eligible for support in obtaining or improving their sanitation facilities. The communities were also facilitated to form grassroots committees to stop open defecation and produced an action plan, for example each member visiting ten households to motivate them to build a hygienic latrine. New latrines were constructed, and unhygienic latrines were improved through both individual household investments and targeted support for the poorest and most vulnerable (identified by the community through wellbeing ranking).

In addition, a wide range of civil society groups including natural leaders, mothers' groups, health workers, youth groups, school committees, religious leaders etc. were engaged and motivated to be involved in improving sanitation. Through the combined effort of project staff, local government representatives and these groups, peoples' knowledge, attitude and practice related to water, sanitation and hygiene changed, evidenced by the improvements in hygienic latrine coverage and sustained use. The CSA data (detailed mapping of sanitation facilities in individual households) from 2014 and 2017 shows an increase in the total number of latrines and an improvement in the hygienic condition. In Dhamainagor, the number of latrines increased by 827 (26%) to 4,048, of which 93% were hygienic in 2017, up from 41% in 2014 (defined as no faeces seen, no bad odour, water seal intact). In Goaldihi, the number of households using open defecation or having no latrine fell from 3,188 to 750 (a 76% decrease) while the number of hygienic latrines increased by 63% to 3,725. SAWRP outcome survey data also shows that the retention rate of functionality of these latrines is more than 95% in both the areas at least two years after installation.

What was most effective from the point of view of LGs and communities?

Discussions with the respondents resulted in identifying the key drivers of sustainable change in people's norms, which are described below:

Setting up a sustainable system linking communities and local government

Activating, motivating and working through the existing government-prescribed structures at Union level i.e. the Union Parishad WASH Standing Committee and WATSAN Committees has contributed to sustainability by linking the grassroots community action committees to decision-makers. For example, the Chairperson of the Ward WATSAN Committee is officially the elected UP Member for the Ward, who feeds back to the Union Parishad and the Chairman. Community committee members shared how they had been able to access the support of the elected representatives to solve sanitation issues, for example motivating reluctant households to install a latrine and that they continue to monitor functionality and use through household visits (Box 1). Respondents felt that this system of committees with regular meetings was an asset generated by the project, which gave them confidence that they would be able to continue to solve future problems.

Box 1. Example of the committee system

We sit monthly and discuss our observations, and if some major challenges occur we note them down and inform the UP Member for this ward who is a member of the WATSAN committee. And if the problem is very big or major then he also asks us, please come to the UP office, we sit together and discuss this issue. And we have the contact number so we can communicate anytime.

Community WASH Action Committee Member (male)

In addition, embedding sanitation as a priority issue in regular social and political life makes the system more sustainable. Elite village members and religious leaders were also involved in monitoring the installation and use of latrines which created pressure on households to keep them functional and clean. These key people were also continuing to promote sanitation through other existing fora such as Ward Shobha (Meeting), as invited guests, at school parents' meetings and religious meetings such as Friday prayers, ensuring integration and ongoing sustainability.

Provision of information about WASH situation and identification of poor households

Several respondents including women's representatives, Union Secretary and Chairman identified the most effective NGO support to be collecting reliable information about poor and extreme poor households and the sanitation situation. While the primary purpose of the CSA (including wellbeing ranking) informed the NGO and UP of the exact water, sanitation and hygiene situation, such that elected representatives knew precisely how many households remained without hygienic latrines, this information had other uses and a wider impact, for example enabling decisions about sanitation budgets. In Dhamainagor, the information was used to provide sanitary napkins for the poorest adolescent girls from the UP budget. The Chairman and Women's representatives reported that it was also used to increase transparency in beneficiary selection for government safety net programmes. Both UPs had budgeted to continue to fund new hygienic latrines for the poorest households and all representatives interviewed were aware of exact numbers of households that still needed support.

Community-led process

The process that initiated the journey was Community-led Total Sanitation (CLTS), through which people understood the faecal-oral transmission routes and the impact of open defecation on health. The approach is "community-led" from the outset, with decisions taken collectively by the community, which respondents identified as having empowered and motivated people to address issues, generating a grassroots social movement for change (some examples given in Box 2) with its own momentum.

Box 2. Examples of Community-led action

The poor people face the problem as they are not able to install the latrine. So we discuss with our community and then we try to find out how to build a latrine in his household, because we know that flies are not for his household, flies are for the community. So flies can destroy our health. So we take the initiative and anyway we build the latrine. But the challenge is for poor people, as they have not much money.

Community WASH Action Committee Member (male)

I felt able to raise my voice. I went to a hospital and saw handwashing basins with soap. Then I was able to advocate for this at another hospital that didn't have it.

Community WASH Action Committee Member (female)

Elected representatives engaged as decision-makers

It was clear from responses that local government staff felt engaged and respected by project staff, and remained at the forefront of decision-making in both Unions. One UP chairman noted that “*I have a limited number of manpower...involved in different types of things. But [NGO] manpower is more than us and they work only on specific activities, so that they collect the information and inform me...that's why I can take initiative quickly*”. A women's representative noted “*[NGO] selected the poor and extreme poor people who actually need this latrine...which helped me to take a decision as the female representative...they always invited us to be involved with the community people*”. The women's representative acknowledged the role of the NGO for collecting reliable information and passing this on to decision-makers like her. Both Chairmen also noted the increased manpower and resources the NGOs brought, which helped them to tackle the sanitation challenge.

Collaboration, empowerment and transparent policy

There was also a clear focus on discussion and “sitting together” to solve problems and motivate people, which again points to the collaborative and empowered nature of these NGO-LGI partnerships. In cases where political or vested interests were at risk of influencing recruitment or beneficiary selection, NGO staff were able to fall back on transparent policies and guidelines, get the support of the right influencers, and achieve agreement which enabled work to continue.

The result of these collaborative relationships is the creation of a ‘trusted insider’ role for the NGO. They have access to communities, to elected officials and to information that would otherwise not be available, and contribute human resources, technical expertise and finance that have an impact on the provision of services. As Batley (2011) points out, winning the confidence of government can enable the NGO to influence policy and practice, through demonstrating how things can work better. This in turn can raise expectations of the local population for transparency and service delivery. We found this to be the case in the two case studies, where both the UPs were empowered to take on the challenge of addressing the sanitation needs of the communities they served.

Evidence for sustainability

The high level of continued use of hygienic latrines after two years, an active system of committees for dealing with sanitation issues and a community-led grassroots social movement described above indicate sustainable outcomes from SAWRP.

In terms of financial resources, Table 1 shows UP budget allocation for WASH over the last three fiscal years, showing that both UPs had significantly increased their total budget allocation for water and sanitation related development activities, which will contribute towards sustaining and expanding the sanitation infrastructure. WASH budgets have been allocated for drainage of water-logged areas, constructing latrines for poor households and tubewell protection. As both UPs implement open budget processes as per Government policy, where people are able to express the needs at ward level open meetings and prioritise their concerns, this may indicate greater priority being given to sanitation at community-level as well as increased political support for sanitation.

Union	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16
Goaldihi	6,50,000 (\$ 7831 approx)	1,80,000 (\$ 2168 approx)	2,10,000 (\$ 2530 approx)
Dhamainagor	6,00,000 (\$ 7228 approx)	5,00,000 (\$ 6024 approx)	3,64,545 (\$ 4392 approx)

The human resources in each UP are fixed as already described, but both Chairmen indicated that they would expand existing roles to fill gaps after SAWRP, for example village police transferring information from Ward meetings. The Goaldihi Chairman was also considering allocating budget to keep the WASH Facilitator position in the Union, recognising the value of additional human resources focussing on WASH.

While the sustainability of the specific outputs and outcomes of the project is important, we can consider also the ongoing sustainability of the change agent role, and their impact on sustaining the direction and rate of change after project activities finish. An example of this would be higher demand for public services and greater accountability for service delivery. In Dhamainagor, requests were made at open ward meetings for improved sanitation services in public places such as markets, a demonstration of demand. The UP responded, led by the Chairman, by using the sanitation budget to construct two blocks of public latrines at marketplaces in two wards, demonstrating the beginnings of demand-responsive local government and accountability for service provision.

Conclusions

We find in the case studies evidence of the likelihood that sanitation improvements will be sustained in institutional, social and financial domains. The research suggests that this has been supported by NGOs having a collaborative approach to working with local government and a ‘trusted insider’ role, involving a significant investment of time for discussion and motivation. In addition, LGIs had a high level of involvement in project activities, due to the NGO approach of activating existing government-prescribed systems and the investments in time on working with LGIs to achieve results by Facilitators embedded in the UP. Providing detailed and reliable information from Community Situation Analysis to decision-makers about the poorest and most vulnerable enabled targeted support for improving sanitation, and increased transparency. Overall, the project raised levels of expectation and demand for improved sanitation services of both LGIs and communities, as evidenced by increased budget allocations, responsiveness and the beginnings of accountability for service delivery.

Respondents identified gaps (e.g. the Facilitator role, funding to cover the remaining poor households), but were overall optimistic and felt that having made huge achievements already they could continue with most current activities. On the flip side, engagement and pro-activeness of the Union Parishads to continue to support sanitation activities for the people will depend on the available financial and human resources and the motivation of future elected leaders. The researchers have seen both optimism as well as concern from the elected members of Union Parishad in terms of availability of financial resources for continuation of activities initiated by SAWRP.

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Notes

1. Goaldihi Union Parishad is part of Khansama Upazila in Dinajpur District in the north-west of Bangladesh with an area of 55km² and a total population of 31,730 (in around 6,300 households). Dhamainagor Union Parishad is in Royganj Upazila, Sirajganj District and has a population of 22,100 people (around 5,400 households). Both UPs are rural with agricultural economies.
 2. Union Parishad (Development Planning) Rules 2013.
http://nilg.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/nilg.portal.gov.bd/page/8256b725_9e14_4cf4_81a4_adca0e9d4ef9/dev%20rules.pdf
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