Form 1: Short/Long Papers

Topic: Equality, non-discrimination and inclusion

Type: Short Paper (up to 2,000 words)

Title: Driving Change: Piloting a Human Rights-Based WASH project in Bangladesh

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Abstract/Summary
WaterAid Bangladesh (WAB) is one of the eight countries piloting a human rights based approach to WASH as part of WaterAid's global HRBA Action Learning Initiative (HRBA-ALI). This paper presents how the project has evolved from a partial concept to an organised, grounded intervention that is shaping the local context in two Union Parishads in northern Bangladesh. In light of the growing importance of the rights perspective in water supply, and as one of WAB's most experimental and innovative projects, this experience holds lessons and questions for organisations looking to understand how to integrate the rights approach in rural water supply projects.

Introduction
The water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector has been gradually entering a rights-based conversation, triggered and sustained by the declaration in 2010 of water and sanitation as a human right. This has become even more significant in the post-2015 context, where the global shift to the Sustainable Development or Global Goals has brought us into a more dynamic and complex world that goes beyond service delivery.

In WaterAid, the recognition of the importance of rights came with the realisation that the organisation was not sufficiently well-versed in the human rights-based approach (HRBA) to understand the full extent of its impact on programming. An international HRBA Action Learning Initiative (HRBA-ALI) was therefore launched in eight countries in 2013, including Bangladesh. The HRBA pilot is one of the Bangladesh Country Programme's most innovative projects, adopting a learning modality to address changing demands and priorities on the ground. To the best of WAB's knowledge, the HRBA-ALI pilot is the only one in Bangladesh to take an explicitly rights-based approach to rural water supply challenges, and has generated valuable lessons on how this approach can support empowerment, equity and inclusion.

Description of the Case Study – Approach or technology

WaterAid Bangladesh initiated HRBA-ALI in two Union Parishads (the lowest tier of local government) in northern Bangladesh in June 2013, partnering with a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) SKS Foundation in August 2013. The initial stage of the project was marked by some confusion around how to actualise a rights-based approach. Entrenched ideas about 'typical' WASH projects meant that partner staff and management were still looking to service delivery models to understand the nature of the project. Following internal meetings and workshops, the project was revised to take a system strengthening approach to the challenges of rural water supply, focusing on capacitating key institutions that were identified by the community as being important to rural life, then enabling these institutions and the community to improve water services as part of their reinvigorated activities.

The four key institutions identified on the basis of consultation with the community were the Union Parishad, Digital Centre, School Management Committees and community clinics. These institutions hold custodianship of the most pressing issues as identified by the community – social safety net allowances, health, education, water and sanitation, equal pay, and transport and communication. The identification of these four points of action took existing activities and reorganised them into distinct, actionable areas of work. A number of encouraging changes have since been observed across the different institutions, discussed below. However, challenges of sustainability and scaling up remain, discussed in the third section.

Main results and lessons learnt

I Dynamics of change
Since the project began, a multithreaded process has been initiated, whereby wider changes in governance practices across the four institutional bodies, and the community, are showing tangible improvements against the challenges of rural water supply.

A. A more accountable Union Parishad

As the lowest tier of local government, Union Parishads comprising of a chairman and twelve members, are the duty-bearers at the heart of any rural community. However, weak decentralisation, fractious politics and a lack of resources and capacities often render them unequal to their considerable responsibilities. A particularly thorny issue in the pilot unions was social safety net allowances, including subsidies for tubewell installations, and how these only went to those favoured by the Union Parishad members or those willing to pay a bribe.

Key in the changes sought by the pilot are for social safety net allowances to be distributed on the basis of a list of poor and hardcore poor, as developed by community groups based on participatory methods, facilitated by project staff. This has become an established practice in both unions now, and subsidies for water connections are now distributed to the poorest households as identified in the list.

Alongside, rights-holders are being made aware of the services entailed to them through various means including the Digital Centre (see below), public citizen's charters, billboards, folk songs and promotional materials. As a result of their awareness of mandated procedures, and simultaneous capacity building of UPs on their responsibilities, both unions have begun to conduct open budget sessions and ward meetings. These platforms provide the space for the community to voice their demands for water and other services, and in recent years, this has led to a perceptible increase in budgeting for water and sanitation.

B. Improved information services

Although the Digital Centres with each Union Parishad provide a number of services, including birth and death registration, accessing government forms, public examination results, etc., they are usually under-resourced and under-utilised. As part of the institutional strengthening undertaken by the pilot, a number of promotional activities were undertaken to inform people about the services available at Digital Centres. The Digital Centres in the two unions are now providing updated information, particularly about government social safety net schemes such as allocations for tubewells and other water options, which help community members keep track of how many allowances are being allotted, how many are being distributed, and to whom. This has enhanced the transparency of the safety net scheme, and acts as a further check to practices of corruption and misappropriation in the distribution of government subsidies for water.

C. Better school and clinic facilities

A key change within communities has been the growing awareness of the importance of quality services. In schools, reigniting school management committees (SMCs) and parent teacher associations (PTAs) through capacity building workshops, and orientation on water and sanitation, has led to discussions in both forums about providing and mainatining safe water supplies in schools.

Community clinics, which provide grassroots health services, have also become more active regarding safe drinking water through the project's work on its governance mechanisms. The administrative structure of community clinics require there to be two management committees for every clinic. However, the roles and responsibilities of these are poorly understood, and in most cases these committees exist in name only. The project supported reforming and orienting these groups, as a result of which management committees are meeting regularly to discuss issues relating to clinic management, including required improvements to clinic water facilities.

D. A vocal, empowered community

One of the most significant changes that has come about as a result of the project is in community members themselves, both those who are directly involved in the groups facilitated by the project, and people in the wider community. Since the beginning of the pilot, community members have been oriented on local governance procuedures, their entitlements and responsibilities as citizens. Following further training on issues such as water and sanitation, safety net schemes, and advocacy and negotiation, community members have worked together to claim a number of entitlements from the Union Parishad, and played a critical role in the revival of community clinic governance and school management.

Alongside, people in the two unions are acting on their responsibilities as the citizenry. The UP had previously not considered tax collection to be feasible because of resource constraints and the widespread unpopularity of taxation. However, following several promotional activities, including folk songs and billboards, on the importance of tax, Gazaria Union Parishad collected an unprecedented BDT 32,000 as tax from the community for the first time in 2015. The amount collected was spent on reconstructing tubewell platforms for poor and extreme poor families.

II. Lessons learned

Since inception, HRBA-ALI has been one of WAB's most dynamic projects, throwing up equal amounts of challenges and achievements. This section draws on the events and outcomes discussed above to elicit lessons on what has worked well, and what may be taken forward to other projects.

A. Focusing on systemic change

The pilot focused on strengthening systems of accountability within existing institutional bodies, and supporting citizens to become more informed regarding their rights. While there is one consistent approach, the multiple points of entry have created a network of change points within the project area. This includes changes that are directly related to improving water supply, such as increased and fairer distribution of water point subsidies, as well as indirect impact through more informed and capacitated institutions that are working to improve water supply in schools and clinics. The focus on process and procedures as opposed to hardware installation or service targets is central to this multidimensional change, and suggests broadening the scope of water supply projects.

B. Taking a learning approach

A unique feature of the project is its emphasis on learning by doing, which has led to a series of improvements in project design. This has been the case almost by default, as with no complete precedent, both WAB and the partner had to figure out what HRBA meant in Bangladesh's context. The focus on iterative, experiential learning with space for experimentation is now a strong narrative within international development more generally, with approaches such as Problem Driven Iterative Approach (PDIA) and Doing Development Differently (DDD) gaining ground.

C. The importance of partnerships

The mindset and capacity of the partner is intrinsic to the success of rights-based projects. It is also important to see HRBA project partnerships as relationships where more support than conventional partnerships may be needed, particularly in nurturing staff capacity and mindset through the adaptive processes and variable outcomes of rights-based activities. This also presents the flip side of the previous point, in that experimentation and revision can take a toll if support systems for staff are not geared to appreciating lessons learned, and instead look to conventional results.

Conclusions and Recommendations

III. Challenges

While significant changes are observed across the four institutions and the communities of the two unions, it is yet too early to understand whether systemic change has been achieved or not. The pilot has showed promise, but there are a number of challenges to achieving impact at scale.

A. Sustainability and scaling up

Given that the first phase of piloting is at an end, questions about sustainability are gaining prominence. In terms of the pilot itself, there is a sense amongst both WAB and SKS Foundation that the pilot needs to run for longer in order to embed the changes that have taken place, and provide a level of handholding support at the field level.

Moreover, while the pilot has reached a degree of maturity in planning and implementation, scaling up and replication are yet to be tested. The unique approach of the project, in particular the option to go back to the drawing board frequently, are not generally encouraged or possible within conventional, time and target-bound projects. This also raises questions around resource mobilisation for scaling up, given that the pilot does not fit with the nature of most grant-funded projects. These are some of the very primary issues emerging from discussions at this point, but they are indicative of the much deeper strategic discussions that need to take place around the transition out of a pilot.

B. Deeper structural issues

While HRBA-ALI has brought key priorities emerging from the community into its work, there remain structural issues surrounding local power dynamics that are rooted deep in all tiers of government, and relate to the very nature of governance in Bangladesh. Currently, the pilot's milestones relate mainly to the Union Parishad level, with some reference to extending to the Upazila level. However, the Union Parishad's actions are often confined by poor decision-making and corruption at upper tiers that they are unable to address, given the highly centralised nature of governance in Bangladesh. The central challenge here, of setting the parameters of a project, is a key question for scaling up the pilot as well as for any other water supply projects looking to bring in HRBA.

IV. Conclusion

Bangladesh has been on the HRBA-ALI journey for over two years now. Project experiences gained so far indicate that the systemic focus of the approach has the potential to tackle rural water supply challenges from multiple dimensions, and contribute to wholesale change stemming from improved governance and accountability, rather than hardware-driven progress. However, the real test of the approach lies ahead, as questions of replication and scaling

up gain importance.	
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{Tables and Figures

- **Tables** should be set up in Word, referred to as 'Table' and numbered consecutively

- **Graphs or diagrams** that were originally composed in Excel, should be linked as an object in the Word file, **and sent as a separate file**. Data should be displayed in greyscale or with patterns rather than colours; they should be in 2-D. Graphs and line images should be referred to as 'Figure' and numbered consecutively.

- **Line images** should be submitted in black and white, with no areas of solid grey, and at a resolution of 600 dots per inch. They should be two-dimensional and NOT three-dimensional.

- **Photographs and Illustrations**. If you are sending photographs, please save them in greyscale, preferably in TIFF or PNG format (at least 300 dpi for size 12 cm wide). Please always send them as separate files, not embedded in the Word document.}