

Case Study

Rights of Water Connections for Urban Slum Dwellers in Bangladesh

A study on DSK's experience in three slums of Mirpur, Dhaka



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Bangladesh:

A successful case of negotiating water connection for the poor in big cities

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As per the Bureau of Statistics data, Bangladesh has an urban population of about 35 million, just over 25% of its total population. Projections indicate that more than 50% of Bangladesh population will be living in urban areas by the year 2025.

All major urban centres in Bangladesh have slums and squatter settlements, the largest concentrations being in Dhaka, followed by Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi. In the last three decades numerous surveys and other research studies have focused their housing and infrastructure problems or socio economic circumstances. Some focused on health problems.

As per the Slum Mapping and Census, 2005, 62.7% of the slum dwellers use municipal taps as source of their drinking water; 33.4% use tubewells and 3.8% use other sources like rivers, ponds, lakes, and canals. In 40.9% of the clusters, one tap is shared by 6-10 households while in 22.7% clusters, a single tap is shared by 11-20 households.

This is a successful case study that shows how a local NGO (a Partner of WaterAid Bangladesh) called the Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (DSK) has been able to help the residents of some of Dhaka city's slums and squatter settlements in gaining access to public water and sanitation services.



The joy of ownership

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The public utility service called the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) which is responsible for provision of water in Dhaka and Narayanganj, is in fact, according to their rules, supposed to provide connections to only those households that can demonstrate the legal status of their plots i.e. have a holding number. In other words, it means that residents who cannot show the ownership of the land in which they reside like in the case of slums and squatters, are simply out of the scope of their work and are not entitled to get any service from this utility. As is easily understood from this and already mentioned, this condition excludes the slum dwellers of the city from receiving any service from DWASA.

Water is a basic need connected with the very survival of human beings and since the slum dwellers constitute a very considerable part of the population of the city both in terms of number (almost 35%) and importance (these are people like the garments workers, the hawkers, shopkeepers, taxi drivers, rickshaw pullers, etc. who actually keep the city alive), this is something that cannot be easily overlooked – rather, something needed to be done in this regard. However, persuading DWASA to include these slum dwellers in the list of its clients was by all means, not an easy thing to achieve. This needed patience and long hours/days/years of negotiations. Having achieved once this breakthrough, it started to gradually build the confidence among stakeholders and in their mind that even under such difficult situation, there exist ways to enable the informal communities to have access to formal utility services with a win-win outcome.

DSK has been working in the slums and squatter settlements of Dhaka city for quite sometime. Working in these areas and seeing the sufferings of the people from close, it appeared to DSK that it could propose to act as an intermediary between the slum communities and the public water authorities to enable the establishment of water connections in some of the slums of Dhaka city. The basic reason why this development organization thought that this might be achievable as it felt that DWASA i.e. the Public Utility was more concerned about the so-called temporary nature of the stay of these people in the slums which naturally posed doubts in its mind regarding proper and timely receipt of bill payments from their end. Thus, DSK thought, if it could act as the intermediary/guarantor for them, the Utility would be more flexible as DSK had a legal registration and a permanent address for contact should there be any irregularity in payment of bills. In fact, DSK also got inspiration in this regard when it found that contrary to common acceptance, the concerned communities were actually not very much transient and very much willing to pay for the water services if they were given the water connections. This is how being convinced, DSK proposed itself as the guarantor to the municipal authorities for making all sorts of security deposits and payment of regular bills on behalf of the slum dwellers to ensure supply of water to them. Agreeing eventually to override their usual policy and practice, DWASA officials initially approved two water points in poor settlements of Dhaka, in 1992 and 1994. As recalls the Executive Director of DSK Dr. Singha, "I still remember the then Managing Director of DWASA actually demanding that if the squatter communities failed to pay, DSK would have to pay from its own account. And DSK agreed to this condition".

Based on its experience with these two first initiatives, DSK started working towards developing a replicable model for sustainable water supply for the urban poor. They

managed to negotiate with DWASA the launching of a pilot project in 12 slum communities, provided that the cost for delivering the services would be recovered within the existing institutional framework. They successfully obtained permission from the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) to build water points and to cut roads on lands owned by the DCC. The UNDP-World Bank Water and Sanitation Programme, the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation and WaterAid Bangladesh provided technical support as well as the initial funds in the form of kick-off loans.

The objectives were plain and simple: To build bridges between the Water Utility Agency and potential user communities through advocacy and intermediation, and encourage changes in the local institutional environment that would facilitate the supply of water to the urban poor. Parallely, DSK helped community groups to mobilise and organise themselves in management committees for the water points and latrines. This included building their capacity to manage the water points and ensure prompt and regular payment of water bills, meet supervision and maintenance costs as well as repaying the capital cost. Technical assistance was also provided to establish and maintain water connections as well as ancillary facilities. As Dr Singha explains “the challenge was to demonstrate and prove that such initiatives are successful; and on the strength of such experience to influence and push local governments to make real investments in such projects to the benefit of the depressed target groups”.

The water delivery model developed by DSK in Dhaka proved to the city authorities that when they are willing to pay, informal communities can be capable and responsible managers of essential services as well as reliable clients for the relevant service providers. For DWASA, this represents an effective system for regularization of illegal connections as well as increasing their revenue. Moreover, equity in terms of supply to the urban poor can be viewed as politically rewarding for those local government officials who have been supporting the programme. Since the inception of the project in 1996, DWASA became increasingly confident in extending its service facilities to slums and squats. 88 water points have been established in 70 slum areas, benefiting more than 200,000 people.

This incredible success of the Project in showing the potential for informal communities to be reliable clients has prompted the water authority to allow communities to apply for water connections on their own behalf, without the need for a guarantor. It is also cooperating in the replication of the project in 110 community-managed water systems, benefiting around 60,000 slum dwellers, with plans to expand the arrangement to one of the largest slums in the city with over 250,000 inhabitants.



The water meter

This new model started a new wave of thinking and has already started bringing in benefits in other areas. Having stayed closely with DSK in developing this model of water supply to the urban poor, WaterAid Bangladesh has moved forward to show that it is replicable and can be taken to scale with other NGOs and municipal authorities. The model is now being replicated in the Dhaka working areas of Population Services & Training Centre (PSTC) as well as in Narayanganj, under the DWASA constituency, through the mediation by PRODIPAN, two other local Partners of WaterAid Bangladesh. Outside the area of DWASA, the replication of this model is progressing in Chittagong City, where three WaterAid Bangladesh Partners - DSK, PSTC and the NGO Forum for Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation, are working with the Chittagong Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (CWASA) to enable the urban poor gain access to public water and sanitation services.

While respecting and recognizing these successes of DSK and some other Partners in bringing such essential services to the city poor, WaterAid Bangladesh at the same time, has always had the conviction that unless the communities really become the owners of these services, there will always be a shade of doubt on the eventual sustainability of such achievements - what will happen when these Partners/Organizations Phase out of these areas at the end of the Project? Something more needed to be done in this direction that was yet to come and which would really complete the cycle!

But to transfer ownership of the water-points to the slum communities not only meant additional works, it also meant a very difficult target to be achieved - convince the DWASA as well as Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) authorities that the slum dwellers will be good and disciplined clients just like the others, not vanish/disappear without paying the bills and, that they will also take good care of the water points and all these could easily be shown citing their past records. A

good way of starting the whole process, it was thought, was to start introducing the communities to these agencies as this might help to establish to them that they also had their right to water and sanitation services. This necessitated DSK to start approaching and negotiating with DWASA and DCC with the aim of transfer of ownership and responsibilities to the community themselves.

It is true that the initial years of persistent and careful negotiation through exhibition of successful precedents have brought about a positive change of mind-set in the Dhaka authorities. Significant changes have also been brought about in the power relationships between the slum dwellers, landlords, water utility and city authorities. At the same time, it is also true that DSK and WaterAid Bangladesh, from their experience, knew that working with governmental bodies like DWASA and DCC required time, this was very much dependent on the commitment of their senior managers and the willingness of their field-level staff to cooperate with this initiative. Additionally, it was also felt that influence from other outside agencies and international organizations would help to convince sceptics within local authorities and utilities. Thus, they were prepared for this with the belief that slowly, but surely, this could be achieved.

Long time has passed from the introduction of the first water point services in the slums through the mediation of intermediary agencies like the development agencies. These have been years of persuasion and negotiation between the concerned development agencies, DWASA, DCC and often representatives of the Community Based Organizations (CBOs) of the concerned slums. While enduring this time with utmost patience and sincerity, the communities have also been trying to put up an equally fitting performance in relation to regular and timely payment of monthly bills and undertaking necessary maintenance and repairs of the points as and when necessary through their O&M Committees under the leadership of the CBOs.

These years of patience and discipline have established the necessary positive image of the communities in the minds of the concerned authorities. Gradually, the ice began to melt. First came the agreement of DWASA that the concerned slum communities could file application for transfer of ownership from the development agency to their respective CBOs provided: they could show evidence that all bills have been paid regularly, that the water points have been maintained properly and that the concerned local government institution member (City's Ward Commissioner in this case) approved/permitted such an initiative. During the process, other details of necessary official requirements in this direction were made available.



The Ceremony

Adhering to all these and providing all the necessary Papers and Documents, the first applications to DWASA from the slums through DSK for transfer of ownership were submitted to its Commercial Manager on 18 December, 2006 for putting it up to its Board of Management. The first official permission in this regard came out on the early days of March 2007 covering ownership of 3 water points in Bauniabadh Kalabagan Slum of Dhaka city's Mirpur area under Ward # 5 which is under Zone # 4 of DWASA (it has a total of 7 Zones in Dhaka and Narayanganj).

The official Ownership Handing over Ceremony was organized on the 7th of March, 2007 in the very heart of the Bauniabadh Kalabagan Slum. It was attended by the Commercial Manager of DWASA, Advocacy & Programme Sections of WaterAid Bangladesh, DSK, local slum leaders and the CBOs and O&M Committees of the slum and the 3 water points, around 50-60 dwellers of the slum and a very significant number of journalists, representing both Print and Electronic Media. The Ownership Documents were handed over to the Committees of the concerned water points by the DWASA Commercial Manager Mr. Md. Nurul Huda Mia. As was stated by both the Director-Policy & Advocacy of WaterAid Bangladesh and the DWASA Commercial Manager, this was the start of a new era in the history of the city – an era that would further strengthen DWASA's progressive outlook and reputation of responding to the basic needs of the city's poor slum dwellers and an era that would see the replication of this noble effort in all such initiatives of all development partners in the other slums of Dhaka city. We are hopeful that following this example set by DSK and DWASA, all other Partners of WaterAid Bangladesh will equally rise to the occasion and start doing this with those slum water points where they are acting as guarantors now and in the process, remove all concerns and doubts that were looming till now on the sustainability of such arrangements.



This is our Water

ⁱ WaterAid Bangladesh sincerely acknowledges the assistance that has been taken in the preparation of this Paper from a previous DSK write-up on the successful introduction of water points in slums through its intermediary role.

ⁱⁱ We also would like to specially recognize the dedicated efforts of DSK in general and the Advocacy Section in particular for the efforts put in the realization of this enormous achievement.