

Guaranteeing the rights of sanitation workers: links between SDG 8 and SDG 6

Sustainable Development Goal



SDG 8 calls for “full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men”, and to “protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, particularly women migrants, and those in precarious employment”. To achieve this Goal, major sanitation challenges in developing countries must be addressed.

Sanitation workers empty pit latrines and septic tanks, maintain sewers and drains, and operate faecal sludge and waste water treatment plants. In many countries, they face social, financial, legal and health challenges that violate their rights to dignity and decent work. They tend to lack tools and protective equipment, and are exposed to chemical, physical and microbial hazards.¹ Work is typically in confined, oxygen-deficient spaces, often causing asphyxiation and ‘sewer deaths’.¹ Sanitation workers face greater risk of infection, injury and death than do average workers,² and rarely have insurance or access to health services. Vulnerable groups, especially people living in poverty and migrants, are more likely to engage in sanitation work, and sanitation workers are stigmatised across the world. In South Asia, ‘manual scavenging’ – manually emptying pits and bucket toilets – disproportionately employs women, and has the added dimension of caste-based discrimination, because it is seen as reserved for people labelled as lowest caste.³



WaterAid/ Poulomi Basu

Vinod Ram maintains an open sewer in Takiyapar slum, Patna, India. “The acid we use to clean the tanks is affecting my eye-sight and the fumes make me cough and give me breathing difficulties.”

- Unsafe sanitation work – largely unrecognised and unprotected by national, municipal, and local governments and organisations – is a manifestation of inequalities affecting the sanitation sector, and a serious violation of decent work.



WaterAid/ Eliza Powell

Community toilet cleaner Rajinder, at work in the community toilet complex at the Dalit Ekta Camp, Delhi, India.



Despite their vital role in urban sanitation service provision and the occupational risks that accompany their profession, sanitation workers are often overlooked in health protection and sanitation programme design, and typically employed informally.¹ Enforcement of labour legislation is consequently low, and unionisation or collective association is weak. Sanitation workers therefore lack the protection and bargaining power key to decent working conditions.

Sanitation is a human right and central to the SDGs, especially SDG 6 on water and sanitation. Human rights and SDG frameworks acknowledge the interdependency of the different rights and goals; the right to sanitation cannot come at the expense of the rights of the workers involved.

Progress towards SDG 8 on decent work is measured by indicators 8.8.1, “frequency rates of fatal and non-fatal occupational injuries” and 8.8.2, “level of national compliance with labour rights”, (both by sex and migrant status), which are very relevant to sanitation work.¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) Guidelines on Sanitation and Health call for the protection of sanitation workers from occupational hazards through health and safety precautions, including: replacement of manual emptying with motorised systems; appropriate personal protective equipment; standard operating procedures; health screenings; and treatment.³ These guidelines acknowledge the responsibility of employers and the health sector to engage with sanitation workers in creating policies that enable them to work safely and with dignity.³

Country case studies

India

In 2017, there were around 5 million full-time sanitation workers in India (including those cleaning toilets), with sanitation work historically delegated along lines of caste, to Dalits.¹ The Indian Government has passed policies to end manual scavenging and implement modernised sanitation systems, but these laws are not properly implemented and manual scavenging is still common practice.² Sanitation work contributes to caste stigma, with workers deemed unclean or ‘untouchable’, and violates the human rights of the workers, who often have few other employment options.⁴ A sanitation worker dies every five days as a result of their work, according to public reports (and many more deaths go unreported).⁵

An ongoing project – run by WaterAid India in association with the Centre for Equity Studies, the Association for Rural and Urban Needy and Safai Karmachari Andolan, and funded by EC-EIDHR – aims to advance the rights of manual scavengers and redress the discrimination they face. It attempts to enhance the social capital of affected communities, especially women, by empowering them to advocate fulfilment of their rights. The project collectivises manual scavengers to stop this work, and organises relief and rehabilitation according to national law. The project also advocates demolition of dry latrines and their replacement by sanitary latrines, to enable safer and more dignified sanitation work. By empowering the people whose lives are put at risk, using a rights-based approach this programme aims to end systemic, caste-based discrimination that permeates society.



Uma Devi has worked as a manual scavenger in the Sangi Masjid slum in Patna, Bihar, India, since she was 11.

“The smell is unbearable so I try to go as fast as I can. I’ve fainted and vomited when working.”

South Africa

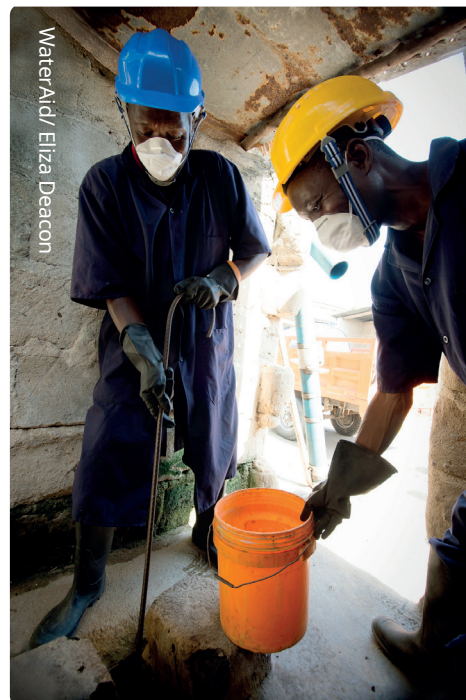
The Government of South Africa has prioritised sustainable sanitation services for its citizens. The municipality of eThekweni, a pioneer in the inclusive provision of such services, has exemplified good practice for the organisation and protection of sanitation workers. It operates sanitation services in a financially sustainable way, with a special gender policy, strict labour laws and a trade union.⁶ Through these formalising measures, sanitation workers in eThekweni use adequate machinery and protective personal equipment, both for pit emptying and sewer maintenance, and work in broad daylight. Combined with innovative sanitation technologies, this enables dignified work.

Tanzania

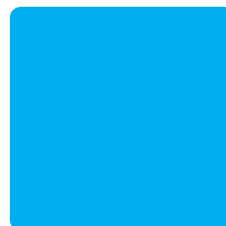
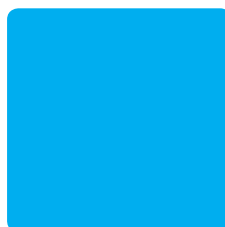
Dar es Salaam has seen unprecedented growth during the past few decades, leading to unplanned settlements that depend on on-site sanitation, such as pit latrines. Community members called ‘frogmen’ provide manual pit emptying services. Their work is dangerous because they do not have appropriate equipment or protective clothing, and some have died in latrines that collapsed in heavy rain.⁷

WaterAid Tanzania, in collaboration with local partners, supported three informal businesses working on solid waste to become registered companies and expand their business to pit emptying. They can now operate formally, compete for tenders and qualify for loans. The businesses employ former frogmen in formal sanitation work, and provide them with safety training and protective gear. The businesses have been successful, with one of the enterprises increasing their employees from 15 to 25 and their customer base from 10,000 to 30,000.

Julius Chisengo (right) and Cleophas Shinga (left) empty a pit latrine at Kigambozi Ward, Dar es Salaam City, Tanzania.



Julius Chisengo (left) and Cleophas Shinga (right) start to empty a pit latrine in Kigamboni Ward, Dar es Salaam City, Tanzania.



Key policy responses:

- As we enter the final decade of SDG implementation, we encourage all governments to take integrated approaches to achieving SDG 6 and SDG 8. This requires ensuring safely managed sanitation services reach everyone, and are delivered by a workforce whose labour rights are protected, and which operates in a safe and dignified environment.
- Many of the challenges sanitation workers face stem from the lack of visibility and their voices going unheard. To address this, governments should:
 - **Recognise** sanitation workers as workers and as human beings who have been historically marginalised.
 - **Formalise** their work by providing them with the working conditions and social protection that match their recognition as workers.
 - Support their efforts to **organise** into workers' groups, so they can amplify their voice and engage in social dialogue, including collective bargaining when appropriate.
- This requires national-level political leadership, with changes in policy and regulations, and adequate financing and monitoring systems. Municipal governments have a crucial role in ensuring implementation and enforcement of standard operating procedures, and compliance with requirements around equipment, training, health and rehabilitation. Development partners and civil society organisations must support these initiatives and the efforts of sanitation workers to claim their rights.

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Find out more at

washmatters.wateraid.org/sustainable-development-goals
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Forthcoming later this year: a report by ILO, World Bank, WHO and WaterAid on the working conditions of sanitation workers.

WaterAid is an international not-for-profit, determined to make clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene normal for everyone, everywhere within a generation. Only by tackling these three essentials in ways that last can people change their lives for good.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) – the only tripartite U.N. agency – brings together governments, employers and workers of 187 Member States, to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes promoting decent work for all women and men.

World Health Organization (WHO) is the United Nations specialised agency for health. WHO monitors sanitation access and the enabling environment for service delivery under SDG 6 and supports implementation progress and multisectoral action to improve health outcomes from sanitation through the WHO Guidelines on Sanitation and Health. This brief is produced under the WaterAid NGO in Official Relations workplan with WHO.