

Water Supply for Urban Poor

Safe water is a basic need, yet millions of urban poor do not have legal access to it. In Dhaka alone, the capital city of Bangladesh, 70 per cent of the estimated 2 million squatter dwellers are deprived of it. Consequently, they spend much of their time and resources in buying drinking water from local water lords, offices, factories etc. Legal, financial and institutional obligations do not allow formal agencies such as Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) to consider squatter settlements as legal entities eligible for basic urban services.

Despite such an institutional environment, urban poor cannot be denied access to safe water. Using NGOs as intermediaries, a pilot project has been launched to bring piped water within legal access of the urban poor in Dhaka. In collaboration with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Participatory Development Fund (PDF) of the World Bank, the project is being spearheaded by Dustha Shasthya Kendra (DSK), a national NGO, under the active guidance and supervision of UNDP-World Bank Regional Water Supply and Sanitation Group, South Asia.



A selected community with water point (circled)

CONCEPT

The pilot project, launched in 1996, uses a process of NGO intermediation and active user participation to construct, maintain and pay for shared water points in slum communities in Dhaka. The project had laid a target of putting up 20 water points in the targetted slum areas of the city. Led by DSK, the project brings together user communities, DWASA and DCC into a unique alliance to meet the following objectives:

- develop an approach for community managed water supply for urban poor based on full cost recovery;

- identify institutional changes necessary to formalise and sustain the approach; and
- explore possibilities for scaling up the project in Dhaka and beyond.

PROCESS

DSK, which works on health care and income generation among the urban poor, believes in cost sharing for even essential services. It starts off with community building and revolving credit. As 'credit culture' takes root, DSK gradually introduces health care, water supply and sanitation services.

The project aims at demonstrating how 'informal' communities can access 'formal' utility services. Thus, the key principle of the project is to respond to demand for water indicated by a willingness to pay. The project works with communities willing to form groups; provides training on management, health/hygiene habits and behavioural change; designs water points and formulates rules on water access and cost sharing; mediates with formal utilities; and provides technical inputs and initial cost for construction.

The process begins by establishing contacts with leaders of poor settlements to elicit community's willingness to manage and share cost of water supply service. These leaders or promoters assist DSK in social mobilization and organisation of the community in groups representing five households each. Depending on the size of a community, 20-30 groups form a centre which also becomes a unit for the water point.

The project works with 20 such communities representing over 5,000 people. The monthly household income of these groups range from US\$ 45-70 only. Community building exercise is so strong that despite such poor income they are not only willing to share costs but take part in operation and management of the water point too. A motivated community finally forms a gender balanced water society - the *Pani Kal Samity*. Each samity of 80 members elects its 13-member executive committee to work with DSK in site selection for water point, formulates rules for water access, sets rates for water use and defines modalities of management, accounting, operations and maintenance.

INTERMEDIATION

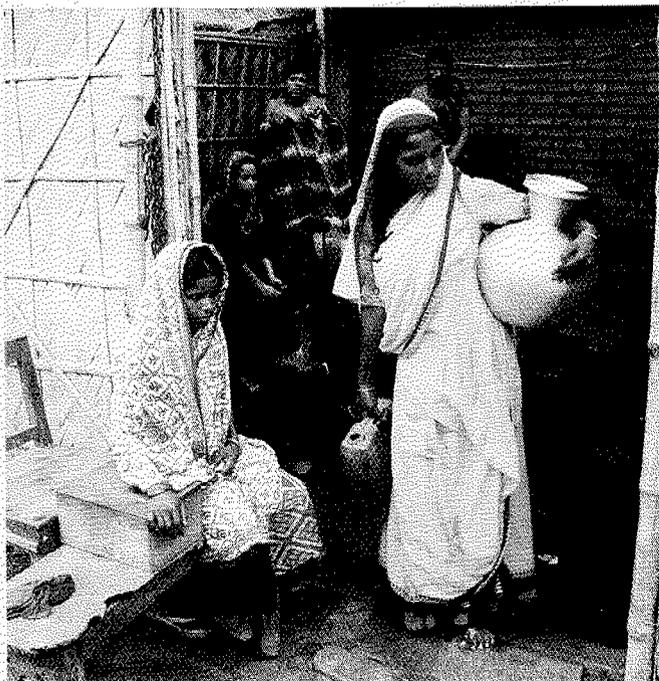
The NGO begins with the community building exercise. It is here that DSK brings in facilitators to organise the communities, form groups and create a context for its activities. The facilitators identify enthusiastic individuals with natural flair for leadership to mobilise communities which are occupying the slum settlements. Although most of such settlements are on government land anywhere for past 4 to 30 years, they share a common plight with respect to water supply and sanitation.

DSK intermediates with the help of the water samity to bring formal utilities within the reach of the community. But before taking up the issue with DWASA for water connection, with DCC for road cutting and excavation and with other concerned agencies for related activities, DSK alongwith the water samity, clears all the details with respect to construction, maintenance and cost sharing of the water point and toilet facilities with the community.

Although it is one big exercise of dealing with the bureaucracy, it is the project's advocacy and perseverance that has played a critical role. But for initial procedural hiccups, the officials have been very supportive of the project

MANAGEMENT

Upon obtaining necessary approvals, DSK and the samity get their acts together in setting up the water point. The water point comprises of an underground reservoir with pipe connection, two suction pumps and a bathing space. For smooth operations, an agreement is signed between the samity and DSK before commissioning of the water point.



Caretaker keeping watch on activities at the water point

The samity manages and operates the water point, repays the capital cost to DSK and pays for the water bills as well. The committee hires two part-time caretakers to collect water rates and to maintain the water point. The rates charged from the community cover DWASA bills, instalments on capital cost and caretakers' salary. Differential collection system is followed as some communities prefer monthly rates, some set rates per use, while many others use a combination of both. Per use rates are charged for non-regular users.

The rate per use is normally Tk 0.50 (1 US\$ = 43 Takas) per bucket of water and Tk 1.0 for washing/bathing. Monthly household rate is set at Tk 10 per person or Tk 30 per household, whichever is higher. Using toilet does not cost much. At Tk 0.50, the toilet is beginning to gain popularity amongst the slum dwellers. Despite such low rates, the samity is able to recover the costs. Experience indicates that the water points in operation have a net positive balance after meeting all regular expenditures. DSK provides management supervision and interacts with water samity through regular monthly meetings.

FUTURE

Of the 20 targetted water points and associated utilities, 15 points have been completed. Remaining five are in fairly advanced stages of completion. The recovery rate is quite satisfactory and it is expected that the samities will be able to repay their loans within the projected time frame.

Upon recovery of the capital cost and the improvement of management capacities of the water samities, DSK will phase out its involvement in the project. As per project design, the samities will then be totally responsible for management and O&M of the water points.

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For further information please contact :

**Regional Water and Sanitation Group - South Asia
UNDP-World Bank Water and Sanitation Program**

55 Lodi Estate, New Delhi 110 003
Tel: : 91- (0)11- 469 0488/469 0489
Fax : 91- (0)11- 462 8250/461 9393
email : rwsg-sa@worldbank.org

3A Paribagh, Dhaka, Bangladesh
Tel : (+880) 2 861056 - 68
Fax : (+880) 2 865351
email : drwsg-sa@worldbank.org@internet

Dustha Shasthya Kendra (DSK)
165/4 Tejkunipara, Tejgaon
Dhaka, Bangladesh
Tel : (+880) 2 9128520
Fax : (+880) 2 815764
email : dsk@citechonet

LIBRARY IRC
PO Box 93190, 2509 AD THE
Tel.: +31 70 30 689 80
Fax: +31 70 35 899 64
BARCODE: 14514
LO:

822 B00H97