

Getting It for the Hard-to-Reach

Water and sanitation coverage in Bangladesh has improved significantly over the years. But a huge number of people are still missing safe WaSH facilities not only because it's not there, but also because they simply can't get to it. These are pockets of areas that have received very little attention due to geophysical, socio-cultural and economic situation. The crisis is mainly rooted in poverty, power and inequality. It is, first and foremost, a crisis of governance, especially in the hard-to-reach areas, and thus governance becomes a key pillar of any strategic approach to solving the problem. Considering the vulnerable WaSH situation of the hard-to-reach areas following the nation-wide advocacy campaign, 'Be Beside the Hard-to-Reach', the Government of Bangladesh has formulated and enacted a separate national strategy intended to ensure water and sanitation facilities for the hard-to-reach. Now is the time for its better implementation. Upholding its commitment to the disadvantaged people's right, NGO Forum has initiated serving the hard-to-reach while the development partners have rightly responded to support the unreached. This undaunted venture has resulted in addressing the hard-to-reach with safe WaSH facilities in an equitable manner.

Hard-to-Reach

'Hard-to-reach' under NGO Forum's intervention firstly means difficult physical communication with the respective areas. Another option is population slipping from the development actions of both government and non-government organizations. These people have been living in accessible areas but could not be reached due to other factors including poverty, physical disability, cultural backwardness, social exclusion, environmental degradation, gender discrimination, etc. Indeed, the communication is given more emphasis in the context of Bangladesh as the hard-to-reach areas like *chars*, *haors*, exposed coastal areas, hills, flood and extreme drought zones are not easily accessible due to communication. At the same time, the proposition of slipped population is also higher in those areas in comparison to that of other plain land areas.

"areas having poor water and sanitation coverage due to adverse hydro-geological condition, having poor and inadequate communication network, and frequent occurrence of natural calamities which in turn results in higher rate of child mortality and accelerates the vicious cycle of poverty, area referred as hard-to-reach areas and the people of those areas as well as people who do not have any fixed place for living, e.g. gypsies, sex workers, are called hard-to-reach people due to their social exclusion from adequate WatSan services".

- National Strategy for Water and Sanitation Hard to Reach Areas of Bangladesh 2012

Geophysically Unreached

The geophysical context of *char*, *haor*, exposed coastal zone, extreme drought areas, hills, etc are diverse and it is distinctive from location to location. Each of this area has distinct characteristics and livelihood pattern of the people. The zone-specific areas are extremely disadvantaged in terms of accessibilities. The economic opportunities are less due to physical environment and the poor people of these area are the most vulnerable. In such a diverse socio-economic condition the hard-to-reach people of these areas have little service and facilities including water and sanitation, and hence suffer the most. The zone-specific characteristics and difficulties in communication of these hard-to-reach areas are standing as the key excuses for the duty bearers for service delivery including WaSH. The *char*, *haor*, hill, coastal region, flood and the drought-prone areas are distinctive by context, and water and sanitation facilities of the

unreached people in these areas is vulnerable, demanding special attention in relation to their WaSH rights.

NGO Forum's intervention is covering the *char*, the *haor*, the exposed coastal area, the flood-prone area and the extreme drought zone as the hard-to-reach areas. NGO Forum's programme has been under implementation focusing the geo-physical and livelihood pattern of these hard-to-reach people since these areas are the most distinct and difficult in terms of communication and moderate civil amenities. For the promotion of sustainable Public Health situation in these hard-to-reach areas in adaptation to various vulnerabilities, the programme intervention is upholding a special commitment to ensure the disadvantaged people's rights to safe water supply, environmental sanitation and hygiene practices.

On way to this, operationalizing and taking the government policy, strategy and programme on the ground, NGO Forum's programme intervention is following community-managed approach involving representatives of all walks. It is involving administrative, political, economic, and social stakes together. The LGI, especially the Union Parishad is being capacitated and playing the lead role in the implementation process. NGO Forum is also catalysing its partner NGOs to intimately involve the LGIs to take lead in promoting the WsSH interventions at the unreached community. The LGIs are also collaborating with other local bodies & catalysts i.e. UWC, UDMC, WWC, VDC, indigenous groups including school teachers, students, religious leaders and cultural groups; private sector operators, CBOs and NGOs for promoting improved hygiene behaviour for all sections of the community people, poor & excluded people in particular in the hard-to-reach community.

Economically Poor

Economic imperative of water and sanitation is important in higher WaSH coverage and practices. About 17% are hardcore poor who maintains livelihood in hand to mouth. The economic status in hard-to-reach areas is more critical than that of other areas. The poor people cannot afford sanitation facilities and water technologies due to economic crisis. Another dimension of hard-to-reach areas is scarcity of land for installation of WatSan technologies. The people live on small piece of land of their own or others' land. In such cases, despite having willingness, people cannot ensure safe water and sanitation for themselves. As the poor people are unable to have access to welfare related services and facilities due to financial crisis, it is the scenario that the poor are not participating in water and sanitation programme, and in turn remaining out of safe WaSH coverage being treated as hard-to-reach by the duty bearers.

NGO Forum's programme intervention concentrates on the consideration that the diseases impose malnutrition, morbidity, child mortality, loss of productive pursuits, working capacity and daily income of the working people, increased medical expenses which eventually leads people towards vicious poverty circle. Considering the importance of safe WaSH for the sake of Public Health promotion, the programme intervention is promoting WaSH facilities with a view to contributing to the poverty alleviation strive. Through the promotional activities and context-specific hardware supports to the communities, the programme intervention is directly supporting the reduction of water and vector-borne diseases which is eventually contributing to reducing the threats to malnutrition, morbidity, mortality, loss of productive pursuits, etc.

Focus has put to include the poor households and disadvantaged communities into the coverage. This is ensured through a high level of motivation and sensitization of the service providers. As for the poor beneficiaries making them realize that safe WaSH is their rights,

motivating and mobilizing them under the platform of VDC has been a big task to draw the results produced so far. Communities' involvement in making social maps, Community Action Plans (CAPs) under VDCs has helped in the mobilization process. Through the process of open budgeting the UPs are upholding their commitment in improving governance in their UP activities as they are taking ADP and LGSP allocations into consideration as raised by the VDCs. The participation of UPs has depicted an optimistic state at promoting pro-poor WaSH at the union level.

Regarding creating poor & disadvantaged people's access to improved and sustainable sanitation facilities, sanitary materials have been provided by the sensitized UPs incorporating the hardcore poor lists developed by the VDCs. These lists are cross-checked with the existing lists of the UPs through which it has ensured that only the actual hardcore poor are receiving the facilities. The poorest beneficiaries are receiving sanitary materials from the latrine production centres of respective unions. The whole process has ensured a participatory local planning process that is contributing in developing the pro-poor service delivery by the LGIs. Moreover, the process is also promoting community ownership over the water technologies and reducing the cost burden through motivating them to take part in cost-sharing of the technologies in line with the national Pro-poor WatSan Strategy.

Socially Excluded

The community composition, poverty, ethnicity, religious and natural environment, geographical traits and bureaucratic mentality of the administration & duty bearers determine many of the groups and people excluded in reaching services including water and sanitation facilities. The people of different hard-to-reach areas are used to traditional hygiene practices. These appear to be the part of their culture. As the WaSH practices are different in communities and areas, the notion of hygiene and cleanliness differs from person to person, locality to locality, by religion and groups. The culture, tradition, habit and behavioural practice of different religious and indigenous groups also determine their role in participation in development programmes as generally they are treated as excluded segments missing all their rights. Conversely, actions meet head-on existing culture of people of religious and/or indigenous communities may keep them away from participation and sometimes become counterproductive.

The VDCs are formed with representatives of poor excluded population. Besides being included in the VDCs as direct members the poor & excluded population are also organized under VDCs mainly through the CAP development process. In this regard, the poor & vulnerable people from target communities have been mobilized in association with the VDCs through various community level activities under NGO Forum's programme. The VDC formation & functioning as a local institution have strengthened the governance mechanism at the local level addressing the poor excluded people's voices in the community demands.

At the ward and union levels the WWCs, UWCs and UDMCs are playing their roles and responsibilities in relation to WaSH promotion. The UPs are leading the local level planning of WaSH services. The UPs, PNGOs and CBOs are involved to make the water supply & sanitation options demand-driven and participatory. Better coordination with UPs has been ensured through the involvement of the VDC members in the UP Standing Committee on sanitation and water supply. With approval of the UP-led WatSan Steering Committee the promotion of water points and sanitation facilities has been ensured under NGO Forum's programme especially for the excluded people in line with the National Pro-poor

WatSan Strategy. Through the programme intervention vertical and horizontal networking with the stakeholders is being maintained by NGO Forum for ensuring effective awareness raising and sensitization among the excluded community groups. Relevant stakeholders are also being sensitized through rooted advocacy in favour of equitable WaSH promotion. As a result the UPs are also addressing the socially excluded population's WaSH rights utilizing the target allocation of ADP and other block grants like LGSP. These progresses are likely to converge towards increasing their access to safe water and improved sanitation facilities.

This process is also ensuring governance in implementing programmes as harmonious relationship is being maintained among the LGIs, WaSH service agencies and facilitating bodies, VDCs, relevant government agencies, NGOs, mass media, local opinion leaders and so on in favour of the excluded segments of the society. The programme intervention is giving special emphasis to address the poor & excluded groups in the selected community. They are being addressed on priority basis in line with the principle of equity.

Physically Challenged

Access to safe water and sanitation facilities is a basic right of all people, including people with disabilities, the denial of which can have serious implications on their well-being. Article 28 in the Convention on the rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) focuses on the right of persons with disabilities "to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families; this includes State Parties duty to ensure equal access to clean water services". But the disabled people in Bangladesh are mostly deprived of any sort of social services and certainly face difficulties to get access to safe WaSH facilities. Social and physical isolation combined with economic hardship make the situation worse turning the disabled people as hard-to-reach, and especially women and girls of respective families are mainly the sufferers to cope with this situation.

Women in Vulnerability

Traditionally, women mainly get involved in household chores. The women having education and family supports take part in actions outside the household. But mainly the rural women are still in traditional actions. Nowadays, participation of women in development activities has been gradually increasing due to supportive policies of government and non-government organizations and their practices. The women living on subsistence level are involving themselves in income generating activities. However, still it is not adequately supported and well-accepted by the society. The status is remaining in a much more dire situation leaving the women as hard-to-reach. Due to lack of acceptance of the women's rights to the society and the service providers, the participation of women in development activities including the water supply and sanitation programme is comparatively lesser than that of the satisfactory level.

Realizing the truth that women are the disadvantaged group in our society in traditional roles and responsibilities, NGO Forum's programme intervention is focusing on participation and involvement of women as mainstream beneficiary in programme planning and implementation. The women are projecting their voice contributing to decision-making. This, in turn, is empower them to a great extent. The active participation of the women group in different domains of the programme implementation is subsequently also opening the door for their job opportunity showing their skills and expertise on way to contribute to WaSH promotion at their community. Thus the plights of women is getting reduced, their lifestyle is being changed

attributing them with leadership qualities and technical skills for involvement in income generating venture as well as providing them preferences for getting safe WaSH facilities.

Active involvement of women in the VDCs is ensuring their participation in programme intervention. Being part of the VDCs the women have already been involved in significant development activities such as, raising communities' WaSH demand through application to the UP Chairmen, identifying women-headed poor households and ensuring that they get more priority for UPs' WatSan allocation, etc. During planning for the installation of the water options the gender issue is highlighted and gender-friendly WaSH promotion is prioritized in the participatory planning sessions. The intervention is ensuring women's involvement in every decision-making process especially for technology site selection, caretaker selection, community's contribution, etc. Women's increased participation is leading to improved WaSH practices at household level.

Climate Vulnerability

Bangladesh is now exposed to adverse impacts of climate change due to its geophysical location, hydrological influence by erratic monsoon rainfall and changes in regional water-flow patterns, etc. Most parts of the country face too much water in monsoon and many parts of it face too little water in dry season. This situation is further aggravated in the warmer climate resulting in severe droughts and increasing floods while the people especially in the exposed coastal areas are being turned as hard-to-reach. The geographical structure of Bangladesh coast has made it vulnerable to recurrent cyclones because of climate change. The affect of storm surge is penetrating deeper into the landmass and causing significant casualties and destroying all infrastructure including water supply and sanitation facilities. The impact of climate change has also been visible in other zones while thousands of disadvantaged people are becoming hard-to-reach in terms of WaSH facilities. The safe water sources are becoming out of order. Sanitation system is collapsing. Thousands of people are becoming refugees of their rights losing facilities including safe WaSH.

NGO Forum's intervention has tried to understand the local impacts of climate change on water, sanitation and human health as well as identify the associated risk and social vulnerability in the respective hard-to-reach zones. Some study conduction has delivered a better understanding on the actual needs of the hard-to-reach areas in relation to WaSH by identifying the current coping & adaptation needs of the local communities. This is contributing in demonstrating and promoting climate-resilient WatSan technologies for the victim communities. The context-specific WatSan technologies are being renovated, demonstrated & finally promoted among the victim poor communities based on the community demand. This is creating the scope to develop sustainable water supply and sanitation options appropriate to local physical, social and cultural context to ensure safe drinking water security, better sanitation and hygiene & health security of the vulnerable communities.

The programme intervention is demonstrating a good number of demand-responsive, context-specific and affordable water supply options combating the challenges of climate change. While rendering hardware supports to the community, it is laying special emphasis on the poor and climate victim of the respective climate-vulnerable areas. Setting-up the Village Sanitation Centres through private sector operators and linking the communities with the services of the existing private entrepreneurs, the programme intervention is also contributing to raise significant sanitation coverage.

Technological innovation in adaptation to climate change hazards and in terms of the feasibility of hard-to-reach areas' geophysical characteristics is contributing to sustain the WaSH promotion in the programme areas. The ownership of the WatSan options is being transferred to the respective community. The communities themselves are maintaining water technologies efficiently. The knowledge-base gained by the community is leading towards sustainability of the respective technologies.