

NGO Intermediation: A Model for Securing Access to Water for the Urban Poor

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Summary

This case study documents how Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (DSK), a nongovernment organization (NGO), helped residents of some of Dhaka's squatter settlements gain access to public water and sanitation services.¹ The program started in May 1996. By April 1998, 32 water points and 5 latrines had been installed, and DSK was planning to construct another 30 water points. In addition, other NGOs who had seen the program's success and wanted to replicate the approach were planning to construct 36 water points throughout the city.

The program's success was largely due to a combination of two features.

- First, DSK used the innovative strategy of acting as an intermediary between poor urban communities and the water utility agency to facilitate water and sanitation provision at regulated prices. Persuading the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) to install water points in squatter neighborhoods was an important breakthrough. Previously, DWASA policy was to make connections only to households who could demonstrate legal tenure of their plot. As it is very rare for inhabitants of Dhaka's poorest neighborhoods to have legal tenure, this effectively bars them from official water provision. In addition, DWASA had no way of recovering its costs in this type of neighborhood.
- Second, DSK paid great attention to motivating poor communities, and building their capacity, so that they could manage and maintain the new facilities themselves. This sense of community ownership is crucial to the program's success. Helping develop it has been a considerable challenge, because of previously low levels of social cohesion in the target settlements.

The mediation model has proved effective in the medium term. However, DSK recognizes that what is ultimately needed is a policy change on DWASA's part. If the utility agency were to recognize rights to water irrespective of land tenure, this would remove an important barrier that currently prevents the residents of slum and squatter settlements from gaining access to water services. On a positive note, in 2001, DWASA reduced the security deposit that NGOs have to pay for a water connection in these neighborhoods.

¹ The case study draws on a report by Nilufar Matin, *Social Intermediation: Towards Gaining Access to Water for Squatter Communities in Dhaka*, May 1999.

Introduction

This case study documents how DSK, an NGO based in Dhaka, developed and implemented a water supply program in some poor squatter settlements. DSK started working in these communities in the late 1980s. Their water and sanitation initiative is part of an integrated program including primary health care, savings, and credit and income generation.

The aim of the project was to develop a replicable model for water supply to the urban poor, based on devolution of management to the communities themselves. The specific objectives were to

- build bridges between the water utility agency and potential user communities, through advocacy and intermediation;
- encourage changes in the local institutional environment to facilitate the supply of water to the urban poor;
- help build capacity in the communities to operate, maintain, and manage water supply facilities; and
- provide technical assistance to communities and the water utility agency to establish and maintain water connections as well as ancillary facilities.

The project has brought about significant changes in power relationships between slum dwellers, landlords, the water utility, and city authorities. DSK's experience shows that social intermediation can be a highly effective strategy to help urban slum dwellers gain access to water.

Background

Dhaka, like other cities in Bangladesh, is undergoing an urban crisis. A 1996 survey found that approximately 20% of the population of the Dhaka Metropolitan Area (1.1 million people) was living in slum and squatter settlements. These neighborhoods, most of which have been existing for several years,² are characterized by high levels of deprivation. Basic services, including water and sanitation, are absent or grossly inadequate. About 97% of poor households in Dhaka do not own the plot on which they live.³ This is important in relation to basic service provision, because access to water and sewerage systems, as well as gas and electricity, is contingent on legal tenure of a plot. In consequence, the urban poor are excluded from public services. An informal water market has arisen, where poor people have to pay higher prices than the better-off, who can access public water supplies.

Stakeholders

The Target Communities

Most settlements where DSK works have existed for 11–30 years. Dwellings are made of impermanent materials such as bamboo, wooden boards, or plastic sheets on rough frames. Roads, open latrines, and drainage are also makeshift.

² According to the Government's "Census of Slum Areas and Floating Population" (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 1997), 60% of Dhaka's slum dwellers had lived in their settlements for 5 years or more, and 20% for 15 years or more.

³ Islam, N., N. Huda, Francis B. Narayan, and Pradumna B. Rana. 1997. *Addressing the Urban Poverty Agenda in Bangladesh. Critical Issues and the 1995 Survey Findings*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

Some settlements are in low-lying areas outside the flood barriers, where the houses are built on bamboo stilts.

Inhabitants of these neighborhoods work as day laborers, garment factory workers, street vendors, maids, transport workers, and in various menial jobs in the public and private sectors. The average monthly income is taka (Tk)2,000–3,000 (\$35–54).

Access to resources is a recurring source of tensions and conflict in these slums. It is common for an area to be dominated by a *mastaan*, or informal local leader, who controls access to employment, shelter, and essential services such as water. Mastaans rely on intimidation and violence to back up their power.

Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority

DWASA is the statutory body responsible for water supply, waterborne sewerage, and subsurface drainage in Dhaka City. During the course of the program, DWASA officials have shown commitment to meeting the needs of Dhaka's poor residents. However, as has already been seen, their policy on connection means that thousands of the urban poor are barred from accessing their services. DWASA itself also loses because it is deprived of the revenue from these potential consumers and because it suffers heavy system loss⁴ through the widespread use of illegal water points.

Dhaka City Council

The Dhaka City Council (DCC) has overall authority over development in the city. With DSK's mediation, DCC has allowed roads to be dug up where necessary, and for water points to be sited on land that DCC itself owns. However, this concession has not involved any change in official DCC policy on the rights of squatters and slum dwellers to housing and related services.

WaterAid

WaterAid is an independent British charity that works in developing countries to bring about lasting improvements to water, sanitation, and hygiene, using local skills and appropriate technologies. Developing capacity is a key element of WaterAid's approach. WaterAid began working on this program in 1996, funding DSK to provide 10 community-managed water points. For the program's second phase, WaterAid is providing funds for another 30 water DSK points, as well as funding other NGOs to replicate the model in other parts of Dhaka. It also supports capacity building and networking among Bangladeshi NGOs concerned with urban water supply and sanitation.

The UNDP-World Bank Water and Sanitation Program

This joint program of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and World Bank aims to assist low-income households in both rural and

⁴ System loss was estimated as 56% in the *Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan 1995–2015*, Vol. 1, p. 30.

marginalized urban areas to gain access to water and sanitation services, by promoting innovative solutions tailored to local needs and conditions. The program prioritizes capacity building and the analysis of policy and institutional environments. It works with partners from government, external support agencies, NGOs, and the private sector.

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) provides technical and financial assistance, as well as humanitarian aid, to developing countries. SDC has been working with partner organizations in Bangladesh since 1972.

DSK's Early Experience

DSK has been working among slum and squatter neighborhoods of Dhaka since 1988. At first DSK worked with people in two neighborhoods in the Tejgaon area of the city, where the Bangladesh Railway owns the land. When DSK started working in the area, access to safe water was very limited. There were no public water hydrants and women had to fetch water clandestinely, and at awkward times, from nearby factories and offices, bribing gatekeepers and messengers for the privilege. In one neighborhood, people were using a pool of wastewater from a chemical factory. Not surprisingly, during the first meetings between the communities and DSK, residents prioritized access to safe drinking water.

DSK approached DWASA for connections to the mains and offered to act as guarantor for the security deposit and bill payments. DWASA officials eventually agreed to waive their usual policy and sanctioned two water points. The first was commissioned in 1992, with a total capital cost of Tk70,000 (\$1,250). This first experience was not altogether successful, as a mastaan, or local powerholder, soon took over the water point, stopped paying the weekly installments to DSK and bribed the DWASA meter readers to report lower than actual readings. However, DSK judged that the initiative was not a complete failure, because 200 households now had access to a water point, and were paying lower prices for water than before.

This experience helped DSK when it went on to commission a second water point in 1994. DSK held intensive discussions with residents of this second settlement, to make sure there was genuine community ownership of the initiative. Two groups, one comprising only women and the other, men, were formed, and these elected a water management committee responsible for managing and maintaining the water points, collecting water charges from users, paying DWASA bills, appointing and paying the caretaker as well as paying the installments to DSK. Four years later, DSK had recovered its initial investment of Tk20,000 (\$357), DWASA bills were being paid regularly, and the community was satisfied with the service.

Based on what it had learned from these two initiatives, DSK worked with the UNDP-World Bank Water and Sanitation Program, SDC, and WaterAid to develop a replicable model for sustainable water supply to the urban poor. The pilot project began in 12 communities in 1996.

The Current Program

Selecting Communities

In 1996, DSK began a needs assessment survey of various slum and squatter communities in Dhaka, as the first step to selecting communities to work with. The community selection criteria were

- expressed community demand and willingness to pay for services;
- age of settlement: communities that had been settled for a long time were preferred;
- prior community experience of group-based participatory development approaches;
- proximity of DWASA water mains; and
- freedom from domination by mastaans.

Communities that were used to free water and sanitation services were avoided. Using these criteria, 12 communities were selected for intervention.

Negotiating with Government Agencies

Negotiations with DWASA began in 1996. At the outset, DWASA agreed to grant permission for 12 new water points, provided that the cost for delivering the services could be recovered within the existing institutional framework. Since then, DWASA has not changed its policy on linking access to water and sanitation to property tenure. However, in 2001, it reduced the security deposit that NGOs have to pay for a water connection in a squatter settlement from Tk7,500 (\$134) to Tk1,000 (\$18), a significant concession.

Community Capacity Building

DSK has worked hard to help develop a strong sense of community ownership. This has been particularly challenging, because of social tensions in the communities, attempts by mastaans to appropriate water point fees, and in some cases, opposition from neighboring agencies and communities who resent the presence of the squatter settlements. Yet it was precisely because of these adverse conditions that DSK realized communities needed to be strengthened, if the project was to have any chance of success.

Once the communities were selected, meetings were held with groups of interested residents, called water hydrant associations. There was no single blueprint for the formation or function of these groups. Rather, this depended on local conditions. In some cases, the association was a distinct body that also undertook savings and credit, as well as health and hygiene activities, whereas in others, the whole user community was referred to as the water hydrant association.

DSK and the communities agreed on their respective duties and responsibilities as follows.

DSK

- Mediate with DWASA and facilitate obtaining legal access to water and sanitation.

- Assist in building community capacity, through the organization of women's savings and credit groups as well as the formation of management committees for water points and latrines.
- Train management committees to manage, operate, and maintain the services.
- Liaise with communities through regular monthly meetings.
- Supervise the installation and management of the water points for 2 years, or until DSK's initial investment had been repaid, whichever was sooner. After that time, DSK would hand over the water points to the communities.

Participating Communities

- Operate water points.
- Undertake minor repairs and ongoing maintenance.
- Collect user fees.
- Appoint caretakers and pay their salaries.
- Pay DWASA bills regularly.
- Repay DSK's capital investment.

Monitoring and Support

Project staff regularly visit communities and water points and continue to help build community capacity to manage the services. For instance, there are monthly meetings between project staff and management committees to review progress and discuss matters such as maintenance, the cleaning of water point sites, bill payment, and conflict resolution within the communities. DSK has also run training courses for management committee members on how to manage and maintain water points, and hygiene.

Water Point Siting and Construction

Finding suitable sites for water points was difficult in most neighborhoods. Settlements are crowded and it was hard to find space for underground reservoirs—necessary because of the lack of continuous water supply, bathing platforms, and, where they were provided, toilets. In most cases, group members offered their houses or part of their houses for the purpose, and were compensated in various ways. Where DCC owned the land where water points were sited, DCC permitted their construction.

DSK procured construction materials locally. Efforts were made to employ masons from communities themselves, but there were not enough skilled workers available. However, DSK was able to employ unskilled laborers from the immediate area. DSK strictly supervised the entire construction process.

Technical Characteristics of the Water Points

The current design for the water points is simple and low-cost. It is the product of trial and error: users have helped modify the original design. The metered

DWASA water line is connected to a covered, shallow underground reservoir. One or more suction hand pumps are used to draw the water from the reservoir. The pumps are surrounded by a platform for water collection, washing, and bathing. To control water use and in the interests of privacy, the platform is fenced in with bamboo matting. Where latrines are provided, these are twin pit latrines with two stalls.

Water Point Management

Management Committees

As women in Bangladesh traditionally take responsibility for obtaining water for their households, DSK wanted to involve women in managing water points as much as possible. Originally, mixed management committees were formed. However, gender relations in Bangladesh tend to be highly unequal, and men usually dominated these mixed committees. All-women management committees were considered, but it was thought that they would face too many difficulties to be able to work effectively. In the end, women-only water management committees were set up in each community, assisted by separate advisory committees consisting of men. This is seen as a compromise, until such time as the women's committees are able to consolidate their strength and act alone.

Charges

The levels at which water charges were set took into account

- prices in local water markets, which determined by the number of illegal connections available for public use;
- the amount to be paid back to DSK to cover its capital investment;
- DWASA's charges; and
- availability of water at each water point.

In some areas, user households that regularly use the water points pay a fixed monthly rate, depending on the number of household members; for instance, a four-member household might pay Tk50 per month, with Tk10 for each additional member. Alternatively, users pay a small fee for each use: about Tk0.50 for a bucket of water, Tk1–2 for bathing, and Tk1 for toilet use, where toilet facilities are provided. One-off payments raise more income than fixed monthly charges.

Caretakers

Caretakers collect fees from users and hand them over to the cashier when the water point closes at night. A DSK representative calls every day to collect the money and put it in the bank. Caretakers are paid Tk500–1,000 per month, depending on the profitability of the water point and the decision of the committee members.

DSK has encouraged the appointment of women caretakers on a rotation basis from the water management committee, but this has not always been possible for various reasons. Sometimes, families who have made land available for the water point do so in return for holding the position of caretaker.

Costs

The total capital cost of constructing 40 water points and 2 latrines amounted to Tk1,507,725 (\$26,986) in February 1999. An estimated 6,000 households have benefited. WaterAid Bangladesh calculates that the overall cost per beneficiary (also taking into account recurrent costs such as those related to community mobilization, training, project staff salaries, etc.) has been approximately Tk726 (\$13).

Lessons Learned

Low-income urban residents are willing and able to pay for water

The project has demonstrated that even those with low incomes are willing to pay for the capital and recurring costs of a reliable water service. This runs counter to official claims that providing water supplies to the urban poor would require prohibitive subsidies. There are policy implications here regarding the reform of public utilities to make them more responsive to the needs of the poor.

Mediation is an effective midterm strategy

Without DSK's mediation, DWASA would not have sanctioned the provision of water points in these poor urban settlements. This innovative role for NGOs has been key to the project's success.

Secure and sustainable provision will only come through policy change

As a result of DSK's mediation, and the realization that poor urban communities are able and willing to pay water bills on time, DWASA has responded positively to the demands of slum and squatter settlements for water and sanitation. However, this change is still an informal one, based on the goodwill and commitment of individual officials. There has been no corresponding change in DWASA policy, without which Dhaka's urban poor cannot have secure access to water and sanitation.

DSK sees no legal barriers to providing water and sanitation to nonlandowners. The relevant ordinance is quite flexible, allowing the utility to enter into any contract it deems necessary to fulfill its aim of providing water and sewerage services.

Community ownership is vital to success

Good management of the water points and effective cost recovery is closely linked to a community's sense of project ownership. This is particularly so in view of the dominance of the mastaans in these settlements. DSK's experience is that it is difficult for an outside agency such as an NGO to intervene against these powerful and unscrupulous local figures unless the community feels strong enough to resist them. Mobilizing urban communities requires intensive involvement from the implementing agency, and DSK has found it to be a slow process. DSK

has also found that prior community exposure to a credit repayment culture, for instance through savings and credit schemes, is conducive to the timely payment of loans and bills.

Gradually, DSK hopes to transfer responsibilities to communities themselves, including approaching and negotiating with DWASA and DCC. Introducing the communities to these agencies may help establish their right to water and sanitation services. Also, DSK has decided that only by devolving responsibilities to the communities can the program achieve sustainability.

The cooperation of field-level government officials is vital

Clearly, a project like this depends on the commitment of senior managers in key agencies—in this case, DCC and DWASA. It is also essential that field-level officials cooperate in any such initiative. This group of actors is important both for developing the project strategy and for timely implementation.