From no service to improved services: how communities in Bangladesh monitor themselves

Introduction

Over the years, Bangladesh has made great strides in provision of drinking water and sanitation to all. As per the 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey[1], the percentage of households in the country using improved drinking water sources stands at 98.5%. The percentage of households practicing open defecation stands at 1.5%. In terms of the JMP ladder, 98% of the households have access to basic drinking water services, whereas only 64.4% of the households have access to basic sanitation services. There are, additionally, serious concerns regarding the quality of water. As per the same report, 40.3% of the households have E. coli contamination and 18.5% households have arsenic concentration (more than 10 PPB) in their source of water. These are averages for the whole country. The Coastal Zone of Bangladesh, which is the focus of this paper, is vulnerable to extreme climatic conditions such as cyclones, tidal surge and salinity. Water and sanitation infrastructure in this region are at greater risk of damage, which in turn pose a threat to the overall quality of water. Moving up the water and sanitation JMP ladder are critical to mitigate the threat. For this, it is important to know the existing level of services, improve the same, and prevent slippages.

Involving the community is critical for assessment of local needs, planning accordingly, ensuring that the said plans are implemented as designed as well as to monitor and evaluate progress of the same. Having it involved in every step of the development work requires a change from viewing the community as a passive recipient to an active participant, who can contribute ideas, make decisions, take ownership of the work, and thereby ensure its sustainability.

The Government of Bangladesh deems local decision making important, as is reflected in the institutional structure for the water and sanitation sector. Water and sanitation services are responsibilities of the local government (outside large cities). The Department of Public Health and Engineering (DPHE), which is responsible for implementation (mostly construction) of water supply projects of the public sector in the rural areas, works in coordination with the local government institutions (Upazila Parishad and Union Parishad) – that are responsible for the operations of the system. The Union Parishad (the village council) is the smallest unit of rural administration that comprises of directly elected representatives, and is responsible for preparation of the union plan and delivering basic services.

It must be stated here that data is essential for effective planning. Lack of data often compromises efficient planning. Engaging community members in data collection ensures validity of the same: community members possess local knowledge and are best equipped to report on their own situation. Data collected through an external agency is not only expensive, but also lacks community ownership. Further, external parties often use software systems, which cannot be understood or used easily at the community level and the process is equally difficult to be replicated. This way of working is extractive by nature and does not encourage community members to understand their own situation over time nor does it empower them to improve the situation of their fellow community members.

As part of the empowering strategy of the Watershed programme in Bangladesh, capacity building of communities was undertaken to enhance its understanding of the situation on the ground so as to enable them to carry out their own sustainability monitoring. The objectives of

carrying out the sustainability monitoring are 1. Planning 2. Lobby & Advocacy 3. Empowerment. The idea behind building the capacity of the community to collect its own data on existing service levels and track the progress made towards sustainable services was to strengthen local decision making as well as fill the much required data gaps (as stated by the local authorities, discussed later in the paper).

From passive to active participants: The process of community based data collection

In November 2017, a capacity self-assessment exercise was held that revealed that both the NGO network in Bhola as well as the Water Management Citizens Committee scored low[2] on two important elements required for policy influencing:
1. Using reliable evidence
2. Common understanding of sustainability of WASH services

Following a workshop on social mapping for community monitoring in November 2017, the exercise was initiated in two unions of Bhola Sadar, a sub-district in the south coastal region of Bangladesh, Dhania and Veduria. The activity started in 2 wards of Dhania union in early 2018. By mid-2019, all 18 wards of these two unions had been completed. In 2019, with the expansion of the Watershed Bangladesh programme to another sub district in the same region – Ramgati – the exercise was initiated in two additional unions: Char Alexandar and Char Badam. As of date, the exercise has been completed in 11 wards, four in Char Badam union and seven in Char Alexandar, and in the remaining work is in progress.

Timeline of social mapping

- **January 2018**: 2 social maps developed for 2 wards of Bhola Sadar on trial basis

- **June-July 2019**: Social mapping completed for remaining 16 wards of Bhola Sadar

- **March-April 2020**: Social mapping completed in 11 of the 18 wards in Ramgati
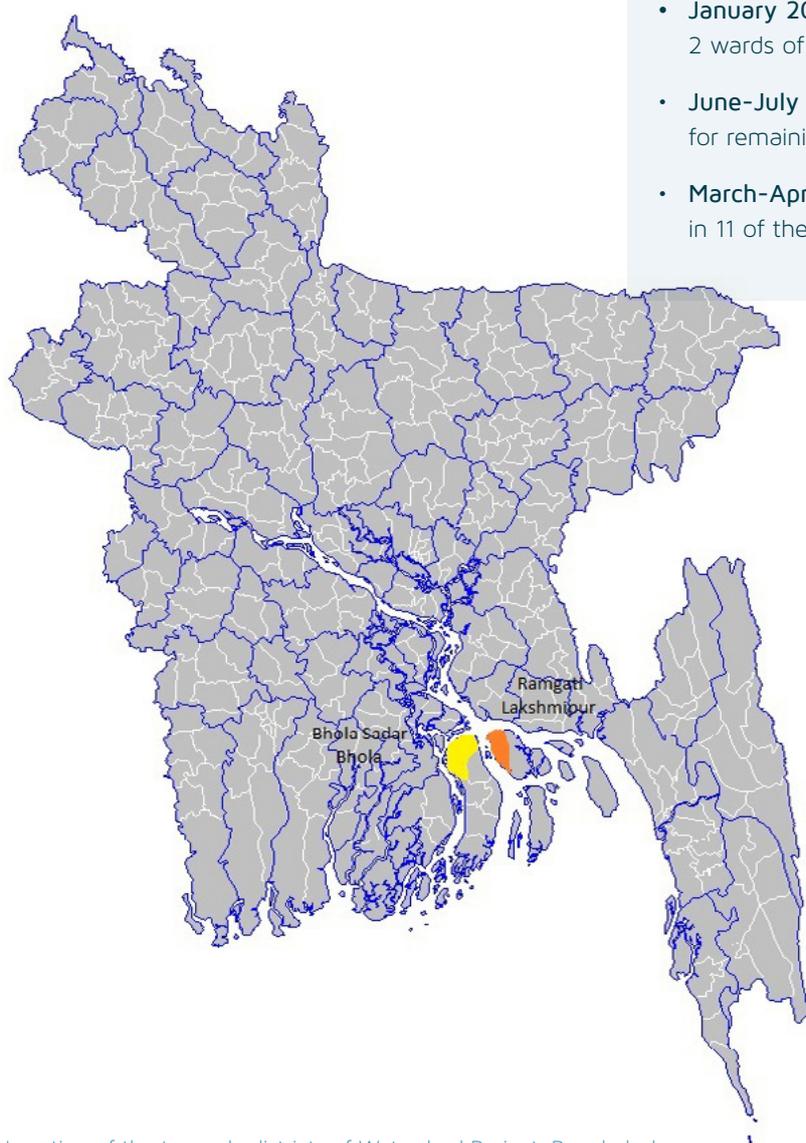
Figure 1: Location of the two sub-districts of Watershed Project, Bangladesh

The social mapping for community monitoring exercise was and is being carried out by members of local CSOs, local councillors (elected LGI members) and residents of the wards, with regular support from the Watershed Bangladesh team.

Figure 2: local CSO participants practising how to draw a social map keeping their home town ward as example

CSOs in Bhola are not academic institutions; CSO staff and volunteers live and work in the communities and engage closely with the members of the communities. To strengthen the capacity of the CSOs on the use of reliable data and understanding sustainable services, a couple of questions were sought to be answered:

- How to help community members understand the importance of sustainability and the importance of delivering water and sanitation services; how to ensure water keeps coming from the pump and toilets can be used all the time by everyone?
- How to collect and use reliable data for policy influencing?
- How to help communities understand that inclusion of marginalised groups is crucial for sustainable water and sanitation services?
- How to start collecting and analysing information on sustainable services at the community level, without being dependent on outsiders?

It is important to state here that at the very beginning of the programme, discussions of the CSOs with the local government institutions and the DPHE had revealed that official data on available services was unavailable. Data available on most rural areas were found to be dated and not periodically updated. Thus, the need to collect reliable data was felt to serve three purposes: address the data gaps on existing services; empower the community with reliable evidence for effective lobbying and advocacy to mobilize resources; as well as, strengthen them to monitor their status and progress on the services.

Building on existing skills and local knowledge, developing a social map seemed a practical method to collect local data.

Over the course of the community data collection exercise, the social mapping practice evolved, based on the community's identification of the data points of their interest and concern. For instance, at the beginning the participants provided the exact number of tubewells and mapped the location of the same. Eventually participants noted the need to map the functionality of the tubewells as well.

> A social map is a visualisation of a community to learn about the community's current situation A social map is often used at community level, in a participatory way. It is important that different gender, ages, abilities, as well as different socio-economic groups are taking part in drawing such a map as agreements need to be reached on for example the wealth classifications.

Figure 3: Social map of Ward 6 in Dhania union

As stated above, the exercise was first carried out in Bhola, in 18 wards of 2 unions, roughly covering 40 villages and 70,000 people. The social maps visualised:

- the **environment**: water bodies and roads,
- number and type of **households**: hard core poor, poor, middle class, rich households
- number and type of **institutions**: school and mosques
- number and type of facilities: household toilets, shared toilets, private and public water points with and without platforms, ponds

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Planning: Social mapping to sustainability monitoring

Post data collection, a data sense-making exercise was held with the CSOs and the community members, to note the existing service levels as well as patterns, if any, in the same. Additionally, to identify any correlation in terms location of certain infrastructure or services with the location of particular groups (ultra-poor households, ethnic or religious minorities, etc.).

It is important to mention here that the data sense-making workshops were also used as platforms for the participants to share their feedback on the exercise. While the participants noted the value of the exercise, they also suggested data points of their interest and concerns that they would like to capture subsequently. These inputs helped in enriching and evolving the data collection process along the course of carrying out the exercise across the four unions. For instance, participants of Bhola observed that -

- It was as important to have the number of households with unhygienic latrine or no latrines, as was the location (closer to waterbody or source of water) of the same.
- Although the number of tubewells was found to be sufficient, it was important to note the locations with no or less tubewells.
- It was critical to capture items such as, location points of ponds along with the quality of water in the same.
- Further, it was important to periodically (at an interval of 6 months) monitor to ascertain the status of the services.

After Bhola, the social mapping exercise was initiated in Ramgati, wherein learnings from Bhola were incorporated. In Ramgati, the exercise had been completed in 11 wards (and was in progress in the remaining), where the participants noted that-

- It was important to distinguish the non-functional from the functional tubewell on the map.
- Alongside household latrines, it was important to map the institutional latrines and the functionality of the same.
- It was also realised that more elements can be included in the map. For example: health care centres; market places; public toilets.

Using data for lobby & advocacy

In November 2019, a dissemination workshop was organised to share the findings from the social mapping exercise conducted in the two unions of Bhola Sadar, with the representatives of the Upazila Parishad, Union Parishad (village council), DPHE, Agriculture and Water Board along with media personnel. (The dissemination workshop for Ramgati is yet to be organised as the social mapping exercise is yet to be completed for the 18 wards of the two unions.) The workshop tied together the objective of the Watershed programme: of building capacity of CSOs and other representatives of the community in collection and sense-making of their own data, and sharing the same with the elected local government representatives and service providers for advocacy on the need for improvement in the services.

To make most of the time and the opportunity, the aggregated information of the wards was shared, including details on the wealth category of the households, number and type of latrines, number and type of tubewells, number and type of ponds, canals and rivers, roads, institutions etc.

The highlights of the workshop were -

- As shown in Figure 4, the percentage of households with hygienic toilets[3] (35%) was found to be lower than expected. The percentage of households with unhygienic toilets at an average (65%) was high. Further, in all of the wards (but one) the number of unhygienic latrines overshot that of hygienic latrines. The number of households with shared latrines was found to be consistently low across the 18 wards of the two unions.
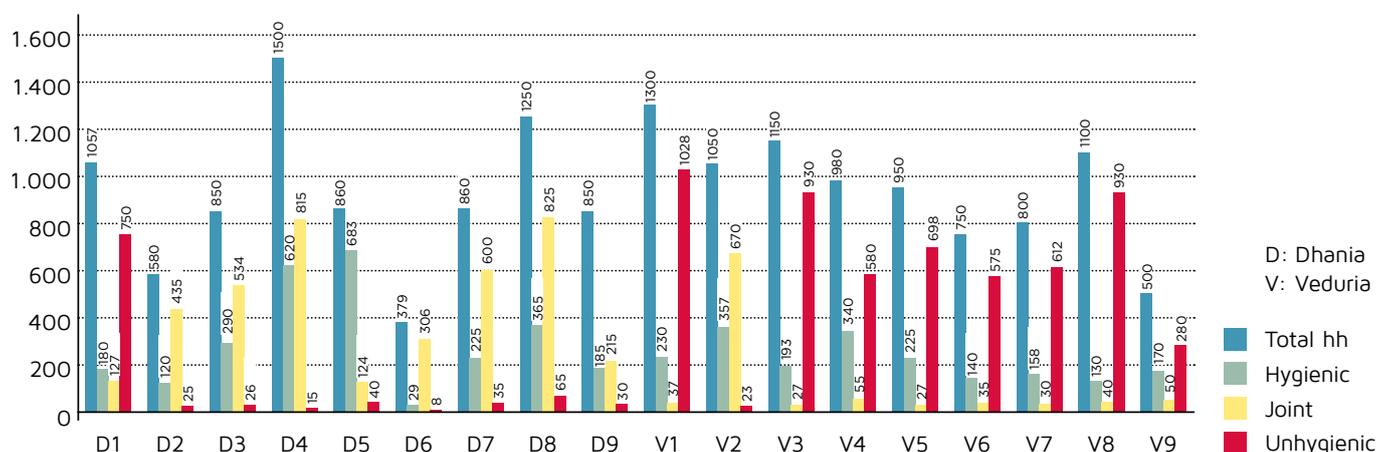

Figure 4: Status of the toilets in the wards of the two unions in Bhola Sadar
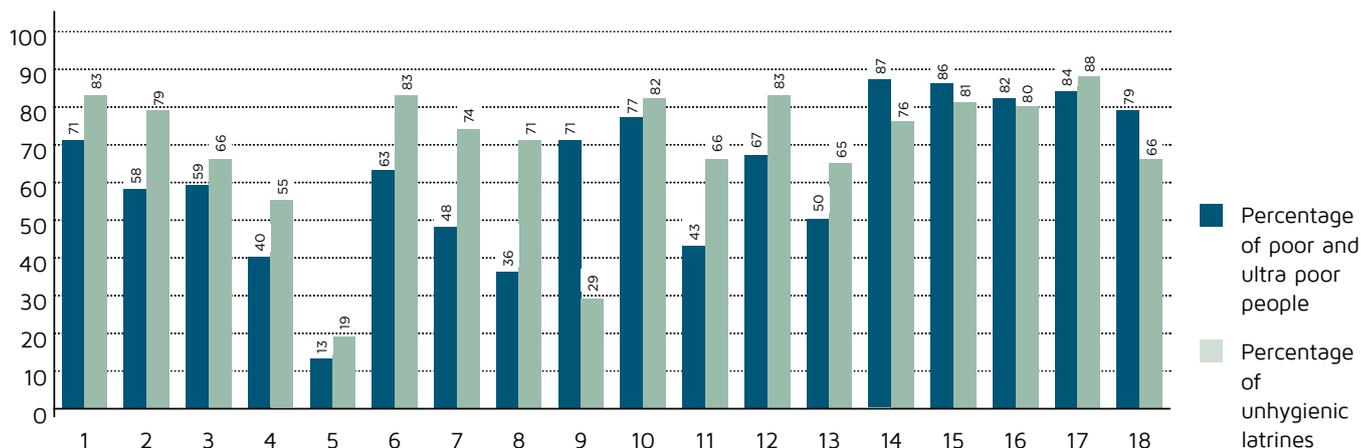
Figure 5: Percentage of poor households and unhygienic latrines in the two unions
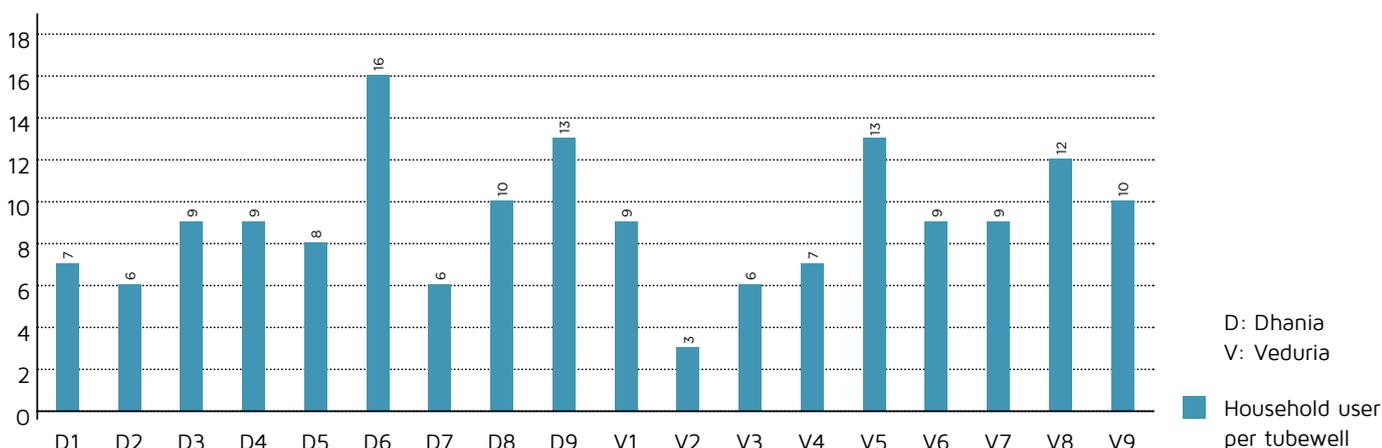

Figure 6: Number of households per tubewell in the two unions

The way forward that emerged from the discussion on this finding was to divide the unhygienic latrines into two categories based on the kind of support required. Some latrines were unhygienic due to poor infrastructure – requiring major structural change, the others were rendered unhygienic due to poor practice. The ones with poor structural conditions would require resource support from the DPHE and the LGI for construction or renovation. For the other kind, support would be required for behaviour change communication.

- To explore the correlation of unhygienic latrines with poverty, the percentage of unhygienic (and shared) latrines were plotted with the percentage of poor (and ultra poor) households in each ward. This came up with interesting findings. In 13 of the 18 wards, percentage of unhygienic latrines is higher than the percentage of poor and ultra poor households. In only five, the percentage of unhygienic latrine is higher. That indicates, poverty is not only the reason of having unhygienic latrines. However, to find more in-depth reasons, we need to go through individual maps.

- The number of tubewell per household was found to be at an average 0.123 (ranging from 0.065 to 0.315). This implied that approximately there was 1 tubewell for 9 households. This average was higher compared to other areas of Bangladesh wherein 1 tubewell was used by 10 or more households (unless of course it was a private household tubewell)[4].

The possible reason for the high number of tubewells in the area was speculated to be an outcome of resource mobilization by political leaders. However, the social map pointed out some locations within a ward lacking sufficient number of tubewells, hence requiring resource support.

- In terms of water resources, the average number of ponds in the wards under study was found to be 142. This was higher than elsewhere in Bangladesh[5]. All participants, including the representatives of the community, LGI and service providers, deliberated that this was not to be taken for granted and that efforts needed to be made to encourage people to prevent contamination of the same. Thus these can be used

as an alternative source of water for purposes except drinking. That helps to position Water Resources Management as a linked issue to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Bangladesh.

It must be mentioned here that initially there was some scepticism on the way the information would be received by the elected representatives and the service providers. The alarming numbers in terms of certain services, it was doubted, may discourage them from improving the same. However, the interactive session was positively received as it proved useful in introducing them to a community based data generation and monitoring tool (in the absence of an official one), as well as a platform to deliberate on the findings and the way forward. The media personnel present in the workshop also well-received the process and results.

Government build tube well for water scarce community in Bhola

Way forward

Monitoring using a social map is an excellent way for CSOs and community members to take stock of current water and sanitation services, the location and condition of marginalised groups, and to keep track of progress being made. A social map can help to improve decision making for better planning of water and sanitation interventions. The data generated in the process can be used for evidence-based advocacy and as an entry point for policy influencing.

The objectives of the sustainability monitoring are to capacitate the CSOs to do the Planning, Lobby & Advocacy and Empowerment. In Bhola, after completion of drawing the social maps, CSOs realized the need for periodic monitoring of the context and update the social maps. They also realized that now they have the tool and data to do lobby & advocacy with the duty bearers for resource mobilization. After Bhola, social mapping exercise started in Ramgati. And the experiences of the CSOs of Bhola has been shared with the CSOs of Ramgati. That led to a collective empowerment process of them. From that the Watershed project experienced that CSOs have a key role in mobilising communities and are the voice of citizens. To get these voices from the field up to the decision-making level, CSOs need support in capacity building: to collate the information, make sense of the same, convert the findings into messages for policy influencing, and initiate dialogue with the government and influential partners.

As part of the Watershed programme, the endeavour has been to capacitate the CSOs and community representatives to become advocate for their needs. Local CSOs are better equipped to improve the standard of water and sanitation services at the local and sub-district level. Support of regional or national level CSOs is required to make policy level changes. In the case of the Watershed programme in Bangladesh, this role is being played by DORP along with Water Aid Bangladesh.

NOTES

1   https://washdata.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/2020-03/Bangladesh%202019%20MICS%20Report.pdf

2   The Watershed programme asked the CSOs to assess their own capacity. The local CSOs in Bhola scored red on these two indicators. See WP5 Bangladesh Monitoring Document, 1 November 2017 https://rsr.akvo.org/en/project/6183/

3   Latrines without water seal and visible cleanliness were identified as unhygienic. In terms of the JMP sanitation ladder unhygienic latrines could be best described as unimproved latrines.

4   https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/90/11/11-101253/en/

5   http://www.fao.org/fishery/countrysector/naso_bangladesh/en