

Where no one has worked before: Innovations behind WaterAid's WASH work in Bangladesh tea garden communities

Poorest of the Poor
Disability

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WaterAid in Bangladesh

Towards Inclusive WASH Sharing evidence and experience from the field



Abstract

Tea pickers are a unique community who live and work on tea gardens in the northeast part of Bangladesh and whose communities are controlled by tea estate owners. These privately owned tea gardens are restricted to outsiders and no non-government organisations (NGOs) have previously been able to introduce water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programs here before. It is essential for WASH access to extend to otherwise excluded communities such as tea garden estates if Bangladesh hopes to attain universal water and sanitation coverage.

Location

» Sylhet District, Northeast Bangladesh



WaterAid in Bangladesh along with its local NGO partner IDEA have successfully started a program to provide WASH services to poor tea pickers. Through this program they have developed innovative approaches to work within the tea gardens that had not been tried before. This case study highlights some of the tools and mechanisms used.

Background

The main objective of the program was to improve access to safe water, accessible sanitation and hygiene services for the tea pickers who live within the tea estate compounds in Sylhet District, Bangladesh. Tea pickers previously collected drinking water from nearby unprotected springs and practised open defecation. Baseline data showed that hand-washing at critical times, water safety protocols, menstrual hygiene management and other hygiene

practices were also poorly followed.

This project introduced context-specific hardware technologies, such as piped water systems within the tea gardens, to address environmental barriers to water supply access. In addition to hardware interventions, hygiene promotion was a central element of the program from the beginning.

The Government of Bangladesh's national targets are for 100 per cent of the population to have access to safe water by 2011 and to improved sanitation by 2013.¹ There are 164 tea gardens in Bangladesh across seven districts, 23 of which lie within this project's focus district of Sylhet. A total of 359,085 people live and work in Bangladesh's tea garden areas. Without ensuring the WASH rights of these people, universal water supply and sanitation coverage in Bangladesh cannot be attained.

Challenges to WASH delivery in tea gardens

Typically, local government development activities do not reach within the tea gardens, which are usually privately owned and closed to public access. Garden workers are dependent on management for basic services such as housing, health and education. Even though the tea gardens in Sylhet are situated on the outskirts of the regional capital, there is a profound sense of isolation within these communities and they exist quite separately to the city. The presence of NGOs in the tea gardens is also extremely limited with only a couple of organisations working on small construction projects. To our knowledge, no NGO has promoted WASH rights or delivered WASH programs within the tea gardens.

A number of circumstances in the tea gardens required innovations to the usual way that WaterAid and its partners deliver WASH programs.

The local government in Sylhet has not been very active to ensure that the WASH rights of the tea pickers are protected. Tea is one of the main export products of Bangladesh and the tea estate owners are rich and powerful

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¹ Government of Bangladesh (2008) *A Situation Analysis Report on Health (MDG 4,5 and 6) - A Baseline for Needs Assessment and Costing*. General Economics Division, Planning Commission, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and UNDP Bangladesh

and in some cases have ties to government. Consequently, there is a lot of pressure from tea garden owners on government to allow them to operate without any intervention and the needs of tea garden workers often remain unrepresented. For example, the government has been unable to insist on schools in all of the tea estates, meaning many children of the tea pickers do not have access to education and as a result follow their parents into tea picking as young adults.

The tea garden managers' association and authorities do not usually give permission for NGOs to undertake development interventions within the tea garden perimeter. They think that if NGOs are allowed to engage with their workers, they will promote rights issues and will agitate the tea pickers to demand higher wages and improved level of services, which will hamper tea-producing tasks in the gardens. Therefore, it was difficult to convince them to allow the program team to access the tea garden site and work with the community members.

The long working hours of tea pickers presented another challenge, limiting opportunities for program staff to interact with tea picker community members. Tea pickers labour six days a week, from dawn to dusk, and during this time both men and women are occupied with their jobs in the tea gardens. Friday is their only weekly holiday and on this day they usually stay in a good mood.

Finally, tea pickers are extremely poor and therefore WaterAid's regular cost-sharing mechanism for WASH infrastructure is inappropriate in this context.

The problems identified above include institutional and attitudinal barriers that have limited WASH program delivery in tea gardens. Environmental barriers also present challenges to these people. The rocky soil condition and long distance from dwellings to water sources make it unsuitable for tubewell technologies and difficult to construct a water supply system. These challenges presented WaterAid and its partners with an opportunity to develop an innovative approach to working within these circumstances.

What we did

This program involved an integrated WASH program in four tea gardens in Sylhet District. WaterAid plans to extend its work to four more tea gardens in nearby Moulavibazar District, where there are over 90 tea gardens.

Securing access

To overcome the institutional and attitudinal barriers to WASH access, WaterAid and its partner IDEA first invested a lot of energy into advocating for the WASH rights of the tea pickers.

Program staff met regularly with tea estate authorities and garden managers and arranged divisional level program meetings, workshops and consultation meetings involving civil society representatives, journalists, members of the district commissioner's office, teachers and local governments to highlight the community's basic needs.

Although initial discussions brought to light the basic human rights of workers to adequate WASH, unsurprisingly arguments stressing the potential benefit to worker health and productivity were thought more persuasive by estate managers and owners. Other factors that contributed to advocacy success with garden authorities was the fact that WaterAid promised to deliver WASH with minimal interruption to normal work or additional cost to owners. Involving the estate managers in program meetings as a Chief Guest had a positive impact on their support for the project. Lastly, a representative of the district police also lent his support to this project by attending planning meetings.

In total, the advocacy process took four months before the first garden authority allowed WaterAid and IDEA to commence work on both hardware and software interventions in their tea gardens.

To overcome the environmental barriers to WASH access, WaterAid promoted the use of appropriate hardware interventions like pipe line water systems, ring wells, tubewells and infiltration galleries (IFG) as required. Also included were initiatives that promoted solid waste management,

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Figure 1
Hardware installation in the tea pickers' community
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Figure 2
Hygiene promotion performance by tea pickers' theatre group
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a drain cleaning campaign, low-cost latrine installation and accessible tap stands and tubewell platforms in the community thereby benefitting hundreds of poor tea pickers. All of these initiatives were implemented through community consultation and contribution.

To comply with tea pickers' daily life, WaterAid and IDEA staff decided, that for the duration of the project, staff at IDEA would change their weekly holiday from Friday to Saturday. This allowed them to organise engagement activities for the tea picker community on Fridays, the only day tea pickers were not engaged in work.

These activities were designed to involve them in the decision-making process, site selection as well as engaging them in cultural activities.

As tea pickers are mostly poor, WaterAid and IDEA adjusted the usual cost sharing mechanism and made provisions so that the tea pickers could offer support for latrine construction in non-monetary terms such as providing labour and local building materials (Figure 1). Due to their limited free time, tea pickers were not asked to construct the water supply system themselves, as normally required by WaterAid when working with rural communities.

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Figure 3
WASH drawing
competition for the tea
pickers' children
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Figure 4
Children with their
WASH-related drawings
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Figure 5
Drawing competition
prize giving ceremony
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Community engagement: learning and sharing information through theatre, music, discussion, play and literature

The program team built several resource centres in the tea gardens where young people would come and develop their own plays and forms of engaging theatre, which highlighted WASH issues among the community (Figure 2). These theatre activities were very popular within the community where entertainment opportunities are normally limited. Several training sessions were arranged for the community theatre groups to support them to come up with their own hygiene related story lines. Now there are two theatre groups who regularly perform at the forum theatres in the tea gardens to promote hygiene awareness with support from IDEA.

The resource centres also support the community, in particular women and children, to gather and discuss WASH and health issues with IDEA staff. A chance to confer about WASH approaches is important for women, as it mainly falls upon them to gather water. Adolescent girls also meet in the resource centre to discuss menstrual hygiene management.

As well as opportunities for discussion, the centre provides access to musical instruments, books and games which stress the importance of WASH. Using these games encourages younger persons to learn about WASH issues while in the resource centre. Children's groups were formed at the centres, so they could learn about the importance of sanitation, hygiene and safe water from an early age (Figures 3, 4 and 5). We provided

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Figure 6
Disability accessible
tubewell installation in tea
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these services keeping in mind the effectiveness of learning by playing.

There are four small libraries built in the resource centres that are aimed at adolescents. These libraries not only include books that draw attention to important WASH messages, but also books covering history such as Bangladesh's war for independence, and stories and poems of renowned writers. In this way, the project is dedicated towards improving younger persons' opportunities for education and learning.

In the future, we plan to collaborate with other organisations working in health and education to exchange ideas and share messages with the tea garden communities.

Recognising the needs of people with disabilities

To highlight the needs of people with disabilities (PWD), this program also constructed accessible latrines and low-height tubewells (Figure 6). Twelve accessible latrines with guide ropes and latrine chairs have already been built. To minimise the construction costs (and increase likelihood of the community replicating the design elsewhere) we used rope pulled taut instead of rails.

Where program staff identified people with visual impairments, we contacted Sightsavers, a large international NGO operating in Bangladesh. As a result, Sightsavers plans to operate eye camps in the garden where they will identify and treat patients with visual impairments.

Impact

After witnessing the project benefits and true intentions of WaterAid, the managers of the tea gardens where we worked have influenced the tea garden association to allow us to further our efforts in other tea gardens. This is an excellent indicator of the success of our approach in reaching one of the most inaccessible groups in Bangladesh. We anticipate that future programs will benefit from the advocacy work already conducted and will not face the same challenges of gaining permission to work in tea gardens.

Started in 2011, this is one of WaterAid's new programs. We began working with a few gardens, and if funds become available, we plan to expand our work to other tea gardens in the future. This program has been nationally recognised in newspapers and on television and during various nationwide events such as World Water Day. During Sanitation Month, the District Commissioner for the Police also acknowledged the program publicly and emphasised its potential to be scaled up.

The project outcomes have also had international ramifications. Program staff have highlighted the different social stigmas faced by tea pickers with the UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, who addressed these issues in her latest research report.² The Special Rapporteur also discussed the issue with the national human rights commissioner of Bangladesh.

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² de Albuquerque, C. (2012) *Stigma and the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation*. Discussion paper

Learning points

The WaterAid in Bangladesh tea garden project has already received attention from the global development community. With our flexible but effective program design, we developed a way to work with vulnerable and marginalised people and, as a result, many tea pickers now have water points and latrines, and are living a more dignified life. They have also come to know that water and sanitation are among their basic rights.

By involving academics, government officials, other NGOs, researchers and influential social elites in advocacy for WASH rights of tea workers, we have been able to deal with social stigma and other social, environmental and institutional barriers.

We would not say that we have been able to change the situation completely, but we have made remarkable progress towards this end.

We seek ideas from others and encourage interns from leading universities with expertise in our working areas to help us to develop innovative ideas that will improve the sector's work with excluded communities and to overcome marginalisation of people from basic services because of their type of work.

References

- » de Albuquerque, C (2012) *Stigma and the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation*, Discussion paper
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This case study is one of sixteen from the Towards Inclusive WASH series, supported by AusAID's Innovations Fund. Please visit www.inclusivewash.org.au/case-studies to access the rest of the publication and supporting resources.

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