

Urban water challenges in Bangladesh

KEY STATISTICS*

Indicator	Urban	Rural	Slum
Estimated Population	38 million	112 million	7 million
Under 5 Child Mortality (per 1000 live births)	53	66	95
Percentage of households using improved sanitation facilities	54%	54%	9%
Use of open or “hanging latrines”	2%	5%	10%
Net attendance ratio in primary education	64%	81%	65%
Net attendance ratio in secondary education	53%	48%	18%
Estimated investment need for urban water supply between 2010 – 2015	USD 2.36 billion	USD 0.64 billion	NA

Source: MICS 2009; Understanding Urban Inequalities in Bangladesh, UNICEF 2010; Water Supply and Sanitation Sector Development Plan 2010-2025

THE REALITIES OF URBAN SLUMS



A young girl pumps water in the Korial Slum in Dhaka. Credit: © UNICEF/2011/ Ahsan Khan

Bangladesh is undergoing one of the fastest urbanization processes in Asia. By 2015, the country's urban population is expected to hit 50 million, representing almost one third of the total population.

According to UNICEF's 2010 Understanding Urban Inequalities in Bangladesh report, around 7 million people are estimated to be currently living in urban slums and this number is rising. The report also challenges the belief that the situation of urban dwellers in Bangladesh is better off than those living in rural areas.

Slum areas are characterized by poor housing, high population density, limited sanitation facilities, a very low socio-economic status for a majority of residents, a lack of security tenure and poor governance. Access to health, education, power, water supply, sanitation and waste management is very limited for the urban poor. Where those services do exist, quality is low and cost can be prohibitive.¹

KEY ISSUES OF WATER AND SANITATION

Water Access and Safety

Access to clean water sources is a challenge in urban areas. According to the Joint Monitoring Programme of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF, access to improved drinking water sources in urban areas of Bangladesh has declined from 88% in 1990 to 85% in 2008.

The situation is worse for slums but statistics on access is unclear. In a survey in 2009 about the living conditions of the urban poor in Bangladesh, 58% of all respondents reported water-sanitation-hygiene related diseases in their households during the three-month period preceding the survey.

In Dhaka, extensive pumping of groundwater has depleted some water sources, calling into question the sustainability of the city's groundwater supply. Surface water as a viable water source is also problematic as it is often polluted by untreated sewage and industrial waste.

Sanitation facilities

Sanitation coverage in urban slums is very low. Only 8.5% of households have access to improved sanitation facilities, compared with a national average of around 54%.² Most slum dwellers have no option but to dispose in drains, open fields and river banks.

The use of hanging latrines, suspended over ponds and rivers is twice as high in urban slums than the national average.³ This means that urban water sources are more likely to be contaminated with raw sewage.

Community latrines in slums are often dirty, badly maintained and lack privacy. Residents often have to wait in line to access them and this sometimes leads to heated exchanges. Communal latrines also pose a security risk to women should they need to use them at night

¹ Understanding Urban Inequalities in Bangladesh 2010 report.

² Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), 2009

³ Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), 2009



Standing in a common bathing area, a young boy brushes his teeth in a slum near Kamapur Railway Station in the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka. © UNICEF/2008/Shehzad Noorani

Hygiene awareness

A 2009 baseline survey conducted by the Human Development Research Centre, showed that while a majority of slum were aware of hygiene rules, the number of people putting such rules into practice was low. For example, only 1% of respondents said they washed their hands before eating and 13% said they washed their hands after wiping a child's bottom.

Menstrual hygiene is a problem for many adolescent girls and women who lack the privacy to properly wash and dry menstrual rags.

Lack of legal rights

Threats of eviction and the absence of legal land rights account for the absence of formal service provisions in slum areas.

Slum evictions are a constant threat and occur without a clear resettlement plan. Informal settlements are thus deprived of support and services from both public and private sectors. The insecurity of tenure and its implicit potential for politicization serves as a deterrent when it comes to allocating funds for the urban poor.

As a result, a parallel structure has emerged where free education and health services are delivered through NGOs and where *mastaans* (middlemen) are providing other services, albeit illegally and for a high fee.

THE ROLE OF UNICEF

UNICEF is working with the Government of Bangladesh on the largest intensive hygiene, sanitation and water quality improvement project ever attempted in the country.



Women inspect a water reservoir provided by UNICEF and its partner organizations in the Rupnagar slum in Dhaka. Credit: © UNICEF/2011/ Jannatul Mawa

The Sanitation, Hygiene Education and Water Supply in Bangladesh (SHEWA-B) project, builds on earlier UNICEF projects and is devoted to raising awareness about the importance of proper hygiene and to providing adequate sanitation facilities.

The USD100 million dollar project operates in 19 districts and targets around 20 million people. Work in urban areas began in 2007, with more than 1,200 latrines installed or repaired in urban areas, as well as almost 800 water points, directly benefitting up to 68,000 people and more than 100,000 people respectively.

The project has seen the establishment of 11,000 volunteer adolescent hygiene monitors, many of whom operate in urban areas and reach up to 600,000 people.

Updated March 20, 2011