BPD SANITATION SERIES

Sanitation Partnerships:
Can partnership make a difference to the urban sanitation challenge?

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Towns and cities across Africa are growing fast and poor settlements are under increasing pressure. The numbers without adequate sanitation continue to grow. Calls for partnerships to help those without proper access to sanitation are increasingly common. Yet practical advice on how to manage sanitation's complex relationships is in short supply – broader bodies of knowledge exist on partnership experience in water or solid waste management.

Recent BPD work on 'sanitation partnerships' in five African cities set out to address this challenge, highlighting four themes with important implications for how sanitation partnerships can be developed, and three promising roles for sanitation partnerships to focus on.

The urban African context

The challenge of providing sanitation in urban Africa is rapidly mounting (it comprises around 25% of the overall global 'backlog' and absolute numbers without adequate access are rising fast). In 2006 for the first time more than half of the world's population will be urban. African cities in particular are growing at an impressive speed thanks to migration from rural areas and high birth rates.

Many of this new urban population will reside in mushrooming informal settlements, or slums. In Africa's towns and cities typically less than 20%, and often far fewer, are connected to the sewerage network. The vast majority of those in slums live with what is known as 'on-site sanitation'. As bucket latrines have been increasingly phased out and septic tanks are costly, for most poor households this means some variety of pit latrine. For those without even this basic amenity, the options include defecating in the open, or making use of the 'flying toilet' for which Kibera, Africa's largest slum in Nairobi, is famous.

As pressures on housing rise, settlements become denser. New ones spring up on marginal land that may be prone to flooding, on steep hillsides or rocky terrain. Fewer rural migrants are able to stay with urban relatives and many in informal settlements rent from landlords or live in backyard shacks (in Kisumu, Kenya an estimated 82% of all housing is rented).

Tackling the problem

Despite on-site sanitation being the reality for the vast majority of Africa's urban population, much of the focus for policymakers and bureaucrats is network sewerage. This attracts large loans and much technical expertise. On-site sanitation (pit latrines and septic tanks) is typically considered a household responsibility and outside the public domain. Support from external actors is thus often very limited.

Where finance comes from outside, it is generally geared at wider public health campaigns that may include health and hygiene education. Mozambique used to subsidise latrine slabs, but there, as in many other places, subsidies are in decline. In their stead new approaches are being tried, such as 'social marketing', which looks to stimulate the private market for latrine construction.

Yet in the last few years sanitation has been making a resurgence on the international development agenda, as its 2002 inclusion in the Millennium Development Goals is testimony. Calls for partnerships to help those without proper access to sanitation are growing. But while we increasingly understand the circumstances in which partnerships to provide urban solid waste collection or drinking water can flourish, much less is known about how to foster large-scale partnerships for sanitation.

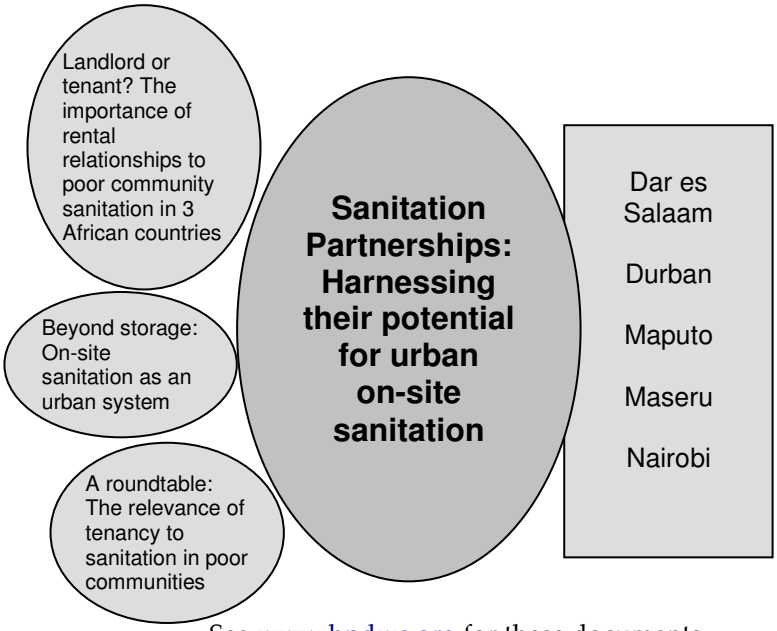
BPD research programme

To gain a better understanding of where partnerships fit into debates around sanitation, BPD set out in late 2004 to work with a series of sanitation-specific case studies. Dar es Salaam, Durban, Maputo, Maseru and Nairobi were chosen (funding constraints dictated a focus on this particular region). Given the overwhelming dominance of latrines in these cities' poor communities, the focus was on programmes and approaches that dealt with on-site sanitation.

Each case was documented in some depth, looking at how on-site sanitation works in poor urban communities, how diverse stakeholders engage, and where on-site sanitation fits within the overall institutional framework.

The findings of the work, abridged in this short paper, are presented in a series of papers in a 'hub and spoke' format. The hub paper outlines the unique challenges that set sanitation apart from other types of service delivery, looking particularly at the relationships between the various actors and role players involved across the on-site sanitation spectrum. It is complemented by three issue papers and five short case studies that form the spokes.

The five African cities reviewed are all very different, yet each is grappling with the challenge of servicing large, poor populations who rely largely on pit latrines. In each case, BPD sought to explore how services are delivered and what roles different stakeholders play. Special attention was paid to the role expected of households in improving on-site sanitation, and how they engage service providers in the process. Policymakers and community structures were a second area of interest.



See www.bpdws.org for these documents

The first finding was that on the ground in Africa successful partnerships for on-site sanitation seem to be few and far between. It was difficult to find examples where on-site sanitation was being addressed at scale or where diverse organisations were working together in a systematic and focussed manner.

This observation suggested that either partnership approaches are not considered useful by practitioners, or that workable partnerships are proving difficult to establish and maintain. BPD's work confirmed that the latter is certainly true: on-site sanitation is complex and while there are good arguments for organisations to collaborate, in practice there are many seen and unseen barriers.

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Evidence that practitioners are disinterested in partnership was less apparent. At the project level, there was often substantial rhetoric around the need to work together accompanied by a few examples of fledgling projects and joint

platforms. Stakeholders rarely insisted on a unilateral approach, but were finding it hard to engage with each other proactively.

Sanitation is rightly seen as cutting across sectors: this generates plenty of calls for partnership and collaboration. The conclusion BPD reached was that sanitation partnerships are hard to sustain, with sanitation seldom delivering quick wins and often only constituting part of partners' overall responsibilities. Practical advice on how to manage sanitation's complex relationships seems in short supply. Whilst broader bodies of knowledge exist on partnership experience in water or solid waste, on-site sanitation has its own complexities that require bespoke solutions.

Four themes emerging across five countries

Four broad themes emerged strongly from the five case studies. Each has implications for how sanitation partnerships can be developed at either local or national level and the actions that will be needed to sustain and expand them.

➢ Theme One – Extending the ladder downwards

The first theme relates to the 'sanitation ladder'. This is a tool used in many contexts, often to outline the choices available to individual households (see www.flowman.nl/ahead18.jpg). It shows how households can upgrade over time from basic latrines to improved versions, then to an indoor toilet and possibly sewerage connection. Yet work in very poor and crowded urban contexts suggests that the ladder concept needs to be broadened. In essence, the ladder as often presented does not have enough 'rungs' – at least two more need to be added at the bottom. The first one down from an individual household service is a 'shared latrine' – such as the many latrines that are shared by renters in block houses across the continent (see photo overleaf). The rung below this is a communal toilet block – whose access may be open to all (as for a public toilet) or restricted to a certain community.

In practice these facilities are commonplace. Yet they are rarely incorporated into conscious planning about what level of service/facility is the most appropriate in a given situation. From a partnership perspective certainly, this decision has important implications at all levels. While the technologies may be similar, the 'rung' chosen often determines the role households are expected to play and how they interact. It also dictates whether local intermediaries are needed to speak or act on behalf of the community. Lastly, it has a significant influence on the expectations and perceptions of stakeholders and the division of roles and responsibilities between different sectors.

(http://web.mit.edu/urbanupgrading/waterandsanitation/levels/ gives an interesting overview where these rungs are included.)

➢ Theme Two – Thinking about rental accommodation

The second theme addresses households' incentives to invest in fixed infrastructure, such as a latrine. In poor urban communities lack of land tenure and renting are both common. The implications of this for how decisions are taken to invest in or maintain sanitation facilities are profound.

Demand responsive approaches aiming to improve local sanitation infrastructure rely on reinforcing householders' desire to invest in sanitation facilities. Social marketing is an example. This desire is very dependent upon the context the householder is faced with, the means at their disposal and the importance they attach to convenience, privacy, dignity and health. Generally though, the incentives for either tenants or owners without land tenure to invest time and money in fixed infrastructure is weak. No surprise here: by definition, tenants do not own the property they live on; they pay rent and typically rely on the landlord to provide amenities like a latrine. Those who lack land tenure may live in fear of being forcibly removed.

A shared facility in a Maseru "linehouse"
© Linda Tyers

Thus in contexts of high tenancy or precarious land tenure, demand responsive approaches focussing on household level infrastructure risk finding few proponents. External support agencies may either have to consider supporting lower rungs on the sanitation ladder or find innovative ways to engage these difficult-to-reach groups.

What low-cost rental housing means for sanitation

In the five cities, there was a broad inverse correlation between the prevalence of low-cost rental accommodation and sanitation coverage. As one would expect, there is generally greater investment in sanitation facilities where people have secure tenure or own their houses, and owner-occupiers are more likely to invest in improvements. Tenants living in low-income rental accommodation may well want the same sanitation benefits as owner-occupiers, but their ability and desire to invest in fixed infrastructure is typically much lower.

In Lesotho there has been a large influx of people into Maseru in the last five years – the majority of these live in corrugated iron line housing (*malaene*) and pay short-term rental. Sanitation facilities are rudimentary, in sharp contrast to most owner-occupiers who, thanks to a government awareness and support campaign, have invested in sturdy VIPs.

In Dar es Salaam and in Nairobi many of the respondents spoken to were renting a single room in a shared house and it was not uncommon to find fifty or more people sharing one pit latrine.

➢ Theme Three – Moving 'beyond storage' of latrines

Pit latrines (the most common facility in poor sub-Saharan Africa) generally evolved in a context where there was space and people owned their own dwelling. When the pit was full, the family would dig another pit, relocate or rebuild the super-structure, and close the old pit. Limited loading on the pit allowed for biological digestion to take place and the contents to be treated *in situ*.

However, in urban slums there are an increasing number of people living per plot. Households increasingly share facilities and loading per latrine is climbing. This further reduces the scope for *in situ* digestion, as does the growing use of areas that are poorly drained, or where shallow rock means pits are small. Pits are filling faster. Furthermore, in many areas there is no longer space to build a replacement pit and latrine. In places where pits were emptied manually and the waste buried on-plot, space constraints are sometimes making even this impossible.

In such contexts pits are merely storing rather than treating excreta. Sanitation no longer becomes on-site per se – it becomes a staged process, in which the first is merely provision of *access* to a facility (the building or improving of pits, or construction of a toilet block). Two more stages become apparent. The second is the *removal* of excreta from the facility, which may then be buried close by or dumped into the immediate environment. Alternatively a third stage takes place, this being the *transport* and eventual *treatment* of the waste.

Those who build or improve latrines are rarely the same as those involved in emptying them.

The third theme is thus the need to look beyond the provision of toilet facilities to the requirements for sustainable usage and maintenance. Unless the linkages between building pit latrines (*access*), emptying the pits (*removal*) and safely disposing of the pit sludge (*treatment*) are addressed, provision of

This Nairobi latrine is not rebuilt when full. The pit sludge is removed manually (and dumped round the corner).
© Sabine Bongi / WSP

additional toilets does not solve the challenge of human waste in poor urban communities. Yet the case studies showed that those who build or improve latrines are rarely the same as those involved in emptying them; making the links between the two can be a challenge for partnership approaches. The challenge of pit emptying is often ignored or underestimated by 'build and improve' sanitation programmes – it needs to be considered an integral part of the equation. The market for mechanical and manual emptying needs to be better understood and incorporated in to sanitation programmes, as does the scope for the eventual treatment of waste from poor neighbourhoods.

➢ Theme Four – Respecting sanitation's 'key contrasts'

In several of the case studies sanitation partnerships were incorporated into broader water or waste management projects. Indeed much of the knowledge on how partnerships can contribute to service delivery stems from water and solid waste services. Theme three above suggests that there are parallels between (on-site) sanitation and solid waste management. Although *from a partnership perspective* sanitation shares certain characteristics with both water and solid waste management, several important considerations set it apart. Understanding these differences proves crucial when considering how partnerships could contribute to bringing about sanitation improvements. Within the five case studies, BPD noted four 'key contrasts' between water and solid waste on the one hand and sanitation on the other. Understanding these contrasts and their implications for partnerships is crucial to developing mechanisms that truly work for on-site sanitation delivery.

The *first* contrast is that providing access often means that significant, generally unconnected, infrastructure is necessary within communities, often below ground. This increases the significance of issues such as land tenure and terrain type. The *second* contrast stems from the segmentation of sanitation introduced in theme three. There is not 'one service' but perhaps three or more, and co-ordination between these can challenge sanitation partnerships. The first two contrasts give rise to the *third*, which concerns the spending profiles associated with sanitation, water and solid waste. Segmentation of sanitation means it is less easy to use operating tariffs (*emptying)* to subsidise capital expenditure (*access*). Payments by users and households may also be much less frequent. This has a large impact on the nature of relationships between stakeholders. The *final* contrast is in respect of grievances and how these are triggered. Breakdowns in a functioning water or solid waste service tend to impact a lot of people simultaneously and be very visible, which can provoke quick responses. This is not always the case for sanitation, where people may be affected at different times or have other options, and where the consequences of a poor or defunct service may be less visible.

This Nairobi vacuum tanker may be out of service, but that only affects a household as their pit becomes full – the whole community may not suffer as soon as the vehicle breaks down. © Photo credit Linda Tyers

Reframing the Findings

Partnership approaches for sanitation are beginning to attract significant attention. BPD set out to explore whether this focus is warranted, with the goal of deepening understanding of whether and how partnerships can improve on-site sanitation in poor urban communities.

In looking at on-site urban sanitation *through a partnership lens*, BPD saw four important themes, all of which have a significant bearing on the nature of relationships between key stakeholders.

The first consideration is that the traditional 'sanitation ladder' may not extend low enough to capture the current circumstances of many poor urban residents. Below individual household facilities lie at least two further rungs: shared latrine facilities and communal block facilities. The way that individuals use and view these services is very different, as is the potential shape of any partnership to deliver them.

The second consideration is that whilst households need to be considered as stakeholders, as many advocate, household circumstances are very diverse. Partnership practitioners thus need to tread carefully. There is an important distinction between owner-occupiers, landlords and tenants. Children, women and men also have different perspectives and possibilities and need to be given equal consideration. These two distinctions are especially important in light of the positive and negative externalities of poor hygiene behaviour: the importance of the public domain in transmitting disease means that communities often suffer or benefit together, not just as individual households. Moreover, households are not just 'customers' for a service; on a small scale they are often also 'providers'; lending facilities to neighbours, digging pits, or renting out accommodation.

The third consideration is the service segmentation of on-site sanitation. *Access* to the service is important (whether pay-per-use or through improved household facilities), but the need to *empty* on-site facilities and *treat* the waste cannot be neglected. If the broader public goods of improved health and environmental protection are to be attained, not only must each of these segments function effectively, but so must the linkages between them.

The fourth consideration stems from the contrasts between on-site sanitation and other forms of municipal service, such as water provision or solid waste collection. The chosen model of service delivery (and any collaborative approach) needs to be cognizant of these contrasts and their implications for stakeholder relationships. This allows stakeholders to build on the strengths and lessons of the other services without neglecting the particular challenges of on-site sanitation.

Together these four themes frame the context for partnership approaches. But can partnerships provide a way to address these challenges and deliver a better service? Or do the many barriers make sanitation partnerships appealing yet elusive, and therefore an unnecessary distraction?

A municipal approach to tackling full latrine pits

In Durban, South Africa, eThekweni Municipality is developing a small contractor development-cum-franchise model for manual pit emptying. Sub-contractors will employ teams of locally-resident wage labourers. Emptiers in Durban enjoy the protection of the law and work in daylight with long-handled shovels, heavy gloves and gumboots, transferring pit waste into drums and from there to specially modified waste skips where it is screened before being disposed of safely.

The low-tech approach in Durban, entirely suited to the dense settlements and extremely hilly terrain, has been relatively successful. The Durban scheme has been carefully designed to nurture the development of a cadre of small-scale service providers able to address the city's pit de-sludging needs on contract to the Municipality. The Municipality is the pivot of a sophisticated project management model linking residents, ward representatives, councillors, community liaison officials, contractors, support agencies, banking services and city water and waste agencies. Emphasis is placed on close liaison with local ward structures and councillors to set up project liaison committees, to manage interactions with residents, and to recruit labourers.

In practice the prospects for replicating this exact model elsewhere on the continent are limited because of the capacity that this contracting requires. Nonetheless it highlights the range of linkages a 'formal emptying service' might address.

Three broad roles for partnership

BPD's first response is that context is incredibly important. Nevertheless BPD sees three broad roles for partnership approaches. These acknowledge the particular boundaries of on-site sanitation, yet suggest ways that partnerships can *harness existing relationships* in better delivering sanitation to poor urban communities.

The *first* role for partnership is to improve the existing relationships between customers and service providers. The aim is to encourage more and better 'sanitation transactions' between these two parties, addressing many small barriers while shaping both supply and demand. Crucial to this is understanding what each party wants in the first place. By working through those close to customers (local leaders, existing Community Based Organisations, engaged NGOs, etc.), partnerships can develop a more nuanced understanding of what it is that customers want, even as they aggregate this demand and relay it more smoothly to service providers. By working through existing service providers, partnerships can help develop a more appealing range of products and facilitate providers' relationships both within and beyond communities. These relationships often mask barriers to providers' financial, political and social viability. Partnerships may also be able to address the particular challenges posed by those without land tenure or complex tenant-landlord relationships.

The aim is to encourage more and better sanitation transactions between customers and service providers.

The *second* role for partnership is to harness these transactions more effectively to deliver the public goods of improved health and environmental protection. Households' motivation for improving their sanitation is frequently said to involve dignity and comfort before health. Yet health gains are clearly an important goal for many projects. Partnerships can work with households' desire for dignity and comfort, yet broaden the existing transactions to encompass hygiene education. They can also act within communities to stress the need for behaviour change at scale, generating demand within these communities for more inclusive and health-oriented approaches. This is important if disease transmission within the public domain is to be overcome. The community-level total sanitation approaches being pioneered in Asia are good examples of this (although social dynamics in urban areas often pose greater challenges than in rural contexts).

Furthermore, partnerships can harness the diverse range of service providers towards the goals of improved health and environmental protection. In doing so they may well align on-site sanitation provision

more closely with 'formal' urban management (including sewerage, sewage treatment and solid waste management). See the box above for a good example of this.

The *third* role for partnership is to overcome fragmentation within the overall 'system' of sanitation; a particular hindrance. This role recognises the diversity inherent within on-site sanitation, but promotes mechanisms to harness this towards better service delivery. By generating support for collaborative approaches, partnerships can bridge some of the challenges posed by service segmentation. It can also empower much-needed interlocutors for public authorities, providers and communities, who can then more easily engage each other. Partnerships also show promise when it comes to surmounting the tensions inherent in trying to nominate one 'lead agent' – here joint policy platforms can assist. In doing so sanitation partnerships lean heavily on a need for champions and intermediaries (explored further in the 'hub' document).

Conclusions

BPD set out with the goal of deepening understanding of whether and how partnerships can improve on-site sanitation for the urban poor. So is the focus on sanitation partnerships warranted? The above suggests that partnership approaches can indeed serve a useful purpose in on-site sanitation. However we urge a more sober recognition of the challenges involved. Collaboration is not easy. Partnerships in water and solid waste are more prevalent, yet we know from other work that they take considerable time and effort to get off the ground. In the short-term at least, one needs considerable faith in the value of that investment. The scarcity of existing partnerships for sanitation implies that they are even more difficult to build and to maintain than in other sectors. The diversity that characterises sanitation calls for particular attention to process issues, careful consideration of context, and strong analysis of the framework within which they can operate. Relying on evidence from five case studies in Africa and discussions with a wide variety of practitioners, policymakers and analysts operating globally, this work and its considerations are offered as a step in this direction.

On-site sanitation is complex and while there are good arguments for organisations to collaborate, in practice there are many seen and unseen barriers.

Please note that the opinions expressed herein are those of the author and not necessarily those of BPD or its members.

Building Partnerships for Development in Water and Sanitation (BPD) is a not-for-profit membership organisation that supports public, civil society and private sector decision-makers and practitioners engaged in partnerships that provide water and sanitation services in poor communities. Active since 1998, BPD focuses on how best to structure, manage and assess such multi-stakeholder collaborative arrangements.

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