

Enabling a Formalized Sanitation Workforce in Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world where sanitation workers are seen and celebrated for their essential role in keeping our communities healthy, a world where these vital workers are valued rightfully for their contribution to society. The formalization of this workforce offers a pathway for making this vision a reality. Formalization will result in empowered workers confidently using mechanical desludging equipment and protective gear, being recognized for their role contributing to public and environmental health, receiving fair wages that meet their needs, and working in a just and dignified work environment.

While there are successful examples, the formalization of sanitation workers in Bangladesh has faced challenges and brought with it unexpected negative consequences. Although the promises of formalization can still be realized, current experiences demonstrate that these unintended outcomes have negatively impacted workers' livelihoods and the environment they strive to protect. The road to formalization is critical for the sector, but needs to be carefully implemented.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Increase workers' access to desludging machinery

- Automation that improves health and safety by reducing direct exposure to waste must be implemented carefully to avoid **reducing income** and leading to **job losses** for vulnerable manual pit-emptying workers.

Ensure that desludging machinery is fit-for purpose

- Government, and supporting investors and lenders, should ensure that technology supplied for desludging is fit-for-purpose and can adequately remove all sludge from pits and latrines.

Formalised Public-Private Partnership as pathways to sustainability

- Standardized, formal contracts which articulate worker rights and income, while setting out expectations, deliverables, costs and processes for both workers and municipalities are required.

Sanitation-worker centered interventions

- It is essential to understand the strengths and needs of workers and their families. Projects need to address these felt needs, and be designed to utilize workers' strengths to ensure sustainability.

Promote user-centered health and safety

- Municipalities and government should promote user-centered health and safety. This means hearing from sanitation workers about their health and safety requirements, and providing required support. This should include hospital and life insurance to minimize financial losses at times of crisis, and usable PPE.

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We are extremely happy with their systematic approach to solving our problems

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With those machines the local government gets money. We do not want vacuum trucks. If automation is introduced, we will not get any money, the profits will be pocketed by the local council.

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METHODOLOGY:

This policy brief is the result of a field-based research which explored how sanitation work modalities impact sanitation workers' current experiences and livelihoods, and how they have been impacted by formalization processes.

The research conducted semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with sanitation workers (n=95), municipality and government officials (n=15), and FSM development professionals and NGO staff (n=6). All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The sanitation workers represented four work modalities – sanitation workers' cooperative members, government employees, private company employees, and independent workers. This approach mirrored the methodology implemented by Zaqout et al. (2021), however, this research covered a larger number of participants and geographical representation.

The study sought to understand the impact of formalization on sanitation workers' lives and livelihoods. It also identified opportunities to strengthen and improve the processes used to formalize the sector into the future. Through exploring the impacts of formalization on different modalities of sanitation work, support can be better tailored for each group of workers.

Sanitation workers and actors in the FSM sector were selected from three location types:

1. Locations where sanitation workers and the FSM sector is, or has recently been, supported by NGO activities.
2. Municipalities with ongoing sanitation investments funded through national level urban water, sanitation and waste management programmes.
3. Municipalities with neither of NGO support nor ongoing national level sanitation investments

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I work for less money now, but I feel safer in regard to my health
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THE IMPACTS OF FORMALISATION

Sanitation workers who were supported by NGOs or employed by a private waste management company were more likely to report positive changes occurring through the process of formalisation.

“I have attained a more stable job than before, and I am accustomed to using mechanical desludging equipment like vacuum tanks. This has enhanced efficiency, allowing me to complete tasks more effectively and earn a satisfactory income. I consistently wear personal protective equipment while working to ensure safety. Now I am satisfied with my working conditions.”

(Sanitation worker, private company employee, recipient of NGO support)

For workers supported by NGOs or employed in the private sector, formalization has provided them with a formal identity as government approved workers, with uniforms, ability to voice concerns and requirements.

Through the provision of Sanitation Workers' Insurance schemes, workers have some financial safety nets, including 20,000 BDT for medical expenses, 50,000 BDT for permanent disability, and 50,000 BDT as a death benefit for their families. One worker shared how a family in their community received this support after losing a loved one.

However, positive impacts of formalisation were not universal. Unfortunately, this was most evident in municipalities with central government-led faecal sludge management (FSM) projects.

Conventional FSM and sanitation intervention projects in municipalities, implemented through national level government programmes, often focus more on infrastructure and technology, with less emphasis on workers' organisations, workers' rights, and capacity development.

This results in projects, infrastructure and tariffs that are set without the consideration of the impacts on workers. One sanitation worker reflected:

“A customer now has to pay the Municipality 2000 taka for one trip of a vacuum tanker. From this amount, we get 400 taka and two people share the fee – maybe it takes 4 or 5 trips to empty the tank ... It used to be that we were paid 5 or 6 thousand for a septic tank. Our income has decreased now. It would be better to be working like before when we kept the whole fee and emptied the tank manually.”

(Sanitation worker, government project municipality, no NGO support)

Following the introduction of municipality-led mechanical desludging, sanitation workers found that their per-job income decreased. As the number of jobs has not increased, this has resulted in an overall decrease in sanitation workers' income. A sanitation worker in a city without a sanitation project stated, *“we don't want vacuum trucks,”* because they had heard of the impacts in a neighbouring town.

Another worker said, *“If we don't work beyond our regular job, we can't even cover daily expenses.”* To make ends meet, some return to informal sanitation jobs, often leading to unregulated waste disposal in rivers or drains, creating environmental risks. Even municipal officers note, *“Informal work causes waste discharge in places not under the directive of the municipality.”*

Furthermore, in some locations, sanitation workers do not have equitable access to emptying machinery. Another sanitation worker reflected:

“We have no access to the vacutag. The Mayor gives the vacutag to their contacts. Now that it [pit emptying] is cleaner work we are ignored.”

(Sanitation worker, government project municipality, recipient of NGO support)

In these places, increased mechanical desludging has meant that traditional pit-emptiers are squeezed out of the sector, with no access to the very machinery that was meant to support them. The introduction of mechanical emptying has made desludging work acceptable to actors who previously viewed the work as too dirty and undignified for them to undertake. Now that it is cleaner and easier, they have entered the sector. In the example above, new workers used their connections to the Mayor to gain a monopoly on the vacuum trucks supplied to the municipality; consequently, traditional cleaners are overlooked in the distribution of jobs booked through the municipality system.

Even the practicalities of the job highlight the unintended outcomes of formalization. While vacuum tanks may handle liquid waste, the solidified, settled sludge is often too thick to be removed by the vacuum trucks. This thick sludge then needs to be emptied manually. For clients, it may seem like most of the job is done, but the toughest and most hazardous part remains, and workers receive much less pay for it. The system, while intended to modernize services, often undervalues the most grueling parts of the job. This can be overcome if fit-for-purpose technology is included in sanitation projects' planning.

Formalising the sector and introducing mechanical desludging was intended to improve both the working conditions and the livelihoods of sanitation workers. However, in many cases, these workers have seen their incomes decrease, and have lost employment, even returning to manual emptying to bypass the municipality systems that have failed them.

MOVING FORWARD

While formalising the sector is essential for moving forward and providing dignity and sustainable livelihoods, how this is done really matters! It is critical that governments and donors design and implement projects that adhere to the ‘do no harm’ principle to sanitation workers.

This do-no-harm principle would ensure that:

- projects do not implement a ‘one size fit’s all’ approach to equipment – but select the appropriate size tanks, and supporting equipment for complete septic tank emptying.
- pre-existing sanitation workers are not ‘squeezed out’ of employment as working conditions improve and access to machinery increases;
- sanitation workers’ income increases rather than decreases as a result of formalisation;
- that sanitation workers have a voice in determining the types of PPE provided to ensure usability and that it is suitable for their work
- sanitation workers are involved in conversations around setting tariffs and pay agreements

If governments, municipalities, private sector actors and NGOs are not careful and intentional in the process of guiding sanitation workers into formalisation, then there can be unaccounted for consequences, which continue to entrench workers in poverty, shame and vulnerability.

This does not change the need for formalisation, which is still critical to ensure safely managed sanitation in Bangladesh, but municipalities and NGOs need to be acutely aware that without careful implementation, unintended harmful consequences are likely.