



# Supporting Sanitation Workers

Lessons from the  
Empowerment Support Fund

June 2025



# Executive summary

Sanitation workers, involved in faecal waste management, face dangerous and oppressive working conditions, as well as stigma. A key challenge weakening their voices is the lack of collective organisation among sanitation workers. Their health, safety and dignity is an issue of human rights, but it is also crucial for achieving the ambitions of safely managed sanitation for all and the promotion of decent work, as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals 6 and 8. A key challenge weakening the voices of sanitation workers is limited collective organisation.

In 2022, the Initiative for Sanitation Workers set up the Empowerment Support Fund. Based on decolonisation principles, the fund aimed to strengthen the capacity of sanitation workers to organise themselves and advocate for their rights. Between 2022 and 2025, a total of USD 200,000 were provided to eight organisations across Africa and South Asia.

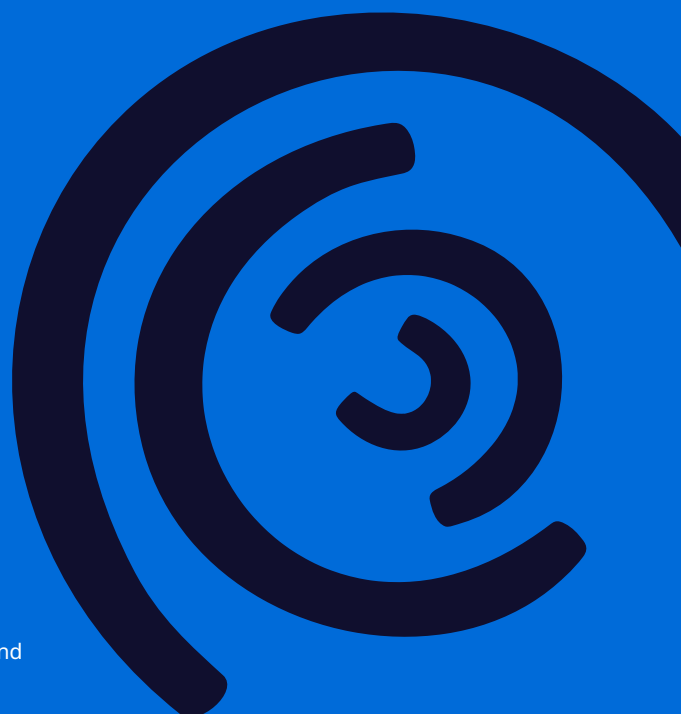
The fund's design involved mapping of sanitation workers organisations, inviting proposals and selecting them. All were done with input from sanitation workers representatives and sector experts. The fund, implemented in several phases, was intentional in trying to reduce the power hierarchies between funders and grantees. Sanitation workers groups were able to determine the objectives and scope of their activities, within a broad capacity-mobilisation-advocacy remit.

The support was tailored to the (limited) organisational capacities, e.g. through iterative proposal co-development and simple administrative and reporting processes. It aimed to establish flexible and trust-based partnerships, e.g. enabling organisations to adapt to changing contexts at any time. More widely, it aimed to amplify grassroots voices, e.g. facilitating access to decision makers where necessary.

The supported groups reported remarkable outcomes including the formation and growth of workers' associations and networks for collective action and mutual support; enhanced advocacy skills thanks to training programmes and stakeholder engagement workshops; and improved recognition by local governments leading to better workplace safety and social protection.

Despite contradictions and limitations, including limited funding and short timeframes, the Empowerment Support Fund was effective in supporting the empowerment and advocacy of sanitation workers groups, demonstrating the value of investing in their grassroots movements and showing disproportionate impact for limited funding over just three years.

It represents a strong case for stakeholders and donors in the sanitation, labour and human rights sectors to replicate similar support mechanisms at a greater scale. This will, for many, require a radical reimagining of ways of thinking and working, ensuring they keep sanitation workers' priorities and voices at the centre, simplify bureaucratic processes, stay flexible, provide non-monetary support and commit to long-term investing.





# Introduction

Sanitation workers involved in faecal waste management function as the backbone of public health around the globe, and yet they remain largely unnoticed and unheard. The seminal 2019 [Health, Safety, and Dignity of Sanitation Workers assessment](#) revealed systemic neglect of their rights due to social stigma, informal employment structures, and inadequate collective representation.

Despite their contributions, they face oppressive working conditions with little recognition, protection or legal safeguards. Sanitation workers experience serious health risks due to the lack of adequate infrastructure and safety measures while handling faecal waste. Belonging to communities that have historically faced systemic discrimination, their work is often burdened by deep-rooted prejudice, frequently associated with their caste or religious background.

This situation is compounded by a lack of organisation among sanitation workers, which affects their collective power. Without a unified voice or opportunities to engage with decision makers, they struggle to advocate for their rights.

The Initiative for Sanitation Workers (ISW) is a collaborative global advocacy initiative established in 2020 by the International Labour Organization, WaterAid, the World Bank, the World Health Organization, and SNV Netherlands Development Organisation. ISW works in consultation with an advisory committee, with over 25 global stakeholders including six sanitation workers' representatives/activists.

Among other objectives, ISW aims to support the inclusion of sanitation workers' rights in government and civil society political agendas at both national and local levels. A key obstacle to this is the weak mobilisation and empowerment of sanitation workers, linked to the informal nature of sanitation work, the lack of established worker organisations, and weak institutional structures and capacities within existing groups.

To address this and to strengthen the collective power of sanitation workers, ISW set up the Empowerment Support Fund, based on decolonisation principles, with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).

**Manual cleaning of drains in peri-urban Karnataka, India.**



# The Empowerment Support Fund

The purpose of the Empowerment Support Fund is to strengthen the capacity of sanitation workers to organise themselves and to enable them to advocate for their rights and entitlements by engaging with authorities and other key stakeholders.

Since 2022, ISW has awarded small grants amounting to approximately USD 200,000 to eight organisations across Tanzania, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This involved supporting activities such as expanding the membership of workers' groups and associations; formalising and building their networks; and strengthening their technical, business, and leadership skills. The table below describes these activities in detail.

Organisation	Type of organisation	Country	Activities supported by the Empowerment Support Fund
<b>Watu Kazi manual emptiers' group</b>	Sanitation workers' group	Tanzania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technical training on improved workplace safety</li> <li>• Business and administrative skills building</li> <li>• Participation in advocacy meetings with local authorities and national stakeholders</li> <li>• Changing public perceptions through radio interactions</li> <li>• Participation in the national platform of manual emptiers in Tanzania</li> </ul>
<b>Center for Law and Justice</b>	NGO supporting advocacy for sanitation workers' rights	Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification and training of grassroots leaders</li> <li>• National-level stakeholders' consultation for sanitation workers to voice their concerns</li> <li>• Mobilisation of sanitation workers for formation and strengthening of the national Sweepers' Association Pakistan</li> <li>• Annual Dignity Awards to honour sanitation workers' contributions</li> </ul>
<b>Vizhuthugal</b>	NGO supporting informal sanitation workers	India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating awareness about rights, legal entitlements and policy provisions among workers</li> <li>• Regular advocacy meetings with local and state authorities</li> <li>• Supporting alternative dignified livelihoods through entrepreneurship training and financial linkages</li> </ul>

Organisation	Type of organisation	Country	Activities supported by the Empowerment Support Fund
<b>Thamate</b>	NGO supporting sanitation workers	India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expanding existing state-level sanitation workers' network</li> <li>• Training on legal provisions, rights and entitlements</li> <li>• Advocacy with district authorities through meetings and memorandum of demands</li> </ul>
<b>ABASE</b>	Manual emptiers' association	Burkina Faso	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mobilisation of manual emptiers and expansion of association</li> <li>• Advocacy with local and national actors</li> <li>• Training on safe emptying practices</li> <li>• Nationwide mapping of manual emptiers</li> <li>• Public engagement through radio programmes</li> </ul>
<b>Nagorik Uddyog</b>	NGO working on rights of Dalits (including sanitation workers)	Bangladesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapid assessment to understand situation of Dalit sanitation workers</li> <li>• Community meetings and training of workers on health and safety, rights and leadership skills</li> <li>• Local- and national-level advocacy meetings with authorities and civil society</li> <li>• Dissemination of policy recommendations</li> </ul>
<b>Gidan Kowa Da Akwai (Manual emptiers' Group) and Vacuum Truck Owners Association (mechanical emptiers' association)</b>	Sanitation workers' groups	Nigeria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal registration of mechanical emptiers' association</li> <li>• Occupational health and safety training of sanitation workers</li> <li>• Radio campaign for public engagement</li> <li>• Engaging with government officials from departments of public health, environmental health, water, sanitation and hygiene</li> </ul>



## Implementation of the fund involved the following stages:

### 1 Fund design

- An initial mapping of organisations working with sanitation workers in low and lower-middle income countries was undertaken. This included sanitation workers' groups, associations and networks as well as grassroots non-governmental organisations (NGOs) engaged in supporting workers.
- This was followed by a series of consultations with some of these organisations through surveys and interviews to understand their contexts, challenges, needs and priorities.
- Based on an understanding of the diverse challenges workers face in different locations, the design of the fund was conceptualised to incorporate decolonisation principles and was finalised with the help of feedback from the advisory committee.

### 2 Proposal selection

- An open call invited short expressions of interest (EOI) from groups and organisations present in Global South countries where WaterAid or SNV offices were located. The objective was to support sanitation workers' organisations (and those working closely with sanitation workers) in their initiatives to: (1) mobilise sanitation workers and build or strengthen their movement and networks; and (2) engage with authorities and other stakeholders, highlight workers' challenges and requirements, and advocate for their health, safety and dignity.
- Of the EOIs received from 25 organisations, ISW requested the 14 shortlisted to submit a proposal using a simplified template. As some grassroots organisations had difficulty developing a formal proposal, ISW held one-to-one calls to discuss and better understand the proposed activities before supporting them further to develop a detailed proposal and grant application. This engagement helped to finalise the list of organisations selected to receive grants.
- Seven proposals were selected based on their alignment with the fund's broad objectives.

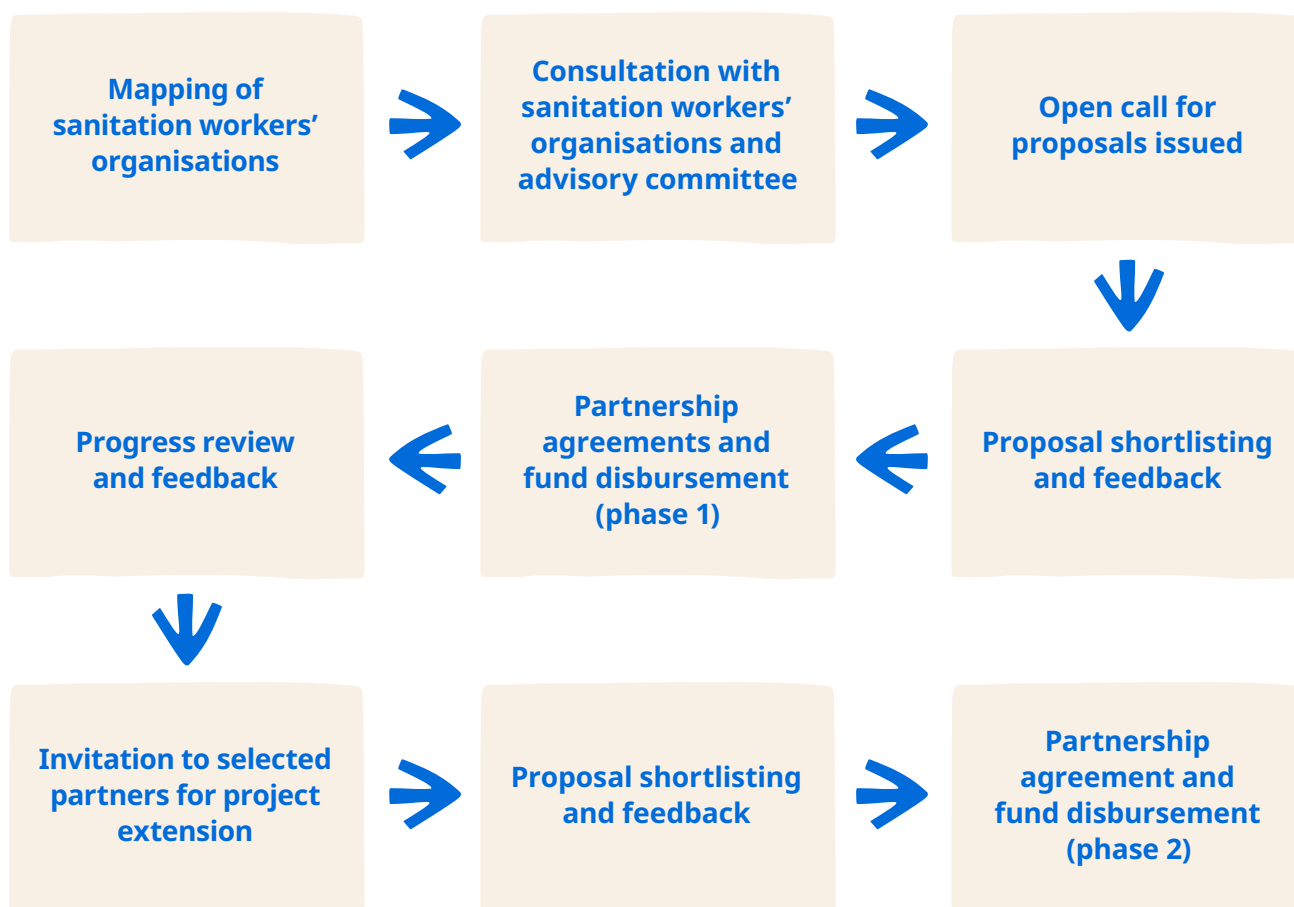
**A meeting of sanitation workers and local official, facilitated by Vizhuthugal under the ISW-supported programme.**





### 3 Activity implementation

- Grants ranging from USD 8,000 to USD 15,000 were given to projects lasting up to 12 months (phase one). Later, selected organisations were provided with a second round of funding for a further 12 to 18 months (phase two).
- ISW provided non-monetary support on a case-by-case basis. This included inputs into proposal development, connecting workers with local stakeholders, and documentation support.
- ISW facilitated online sessions to enable cross-learning between the supported organisations.



The fund was designed to align with the principles of decolonising aid, prioritising community-led decision-making and reducing administrative barriers by focusing on local contexts and needs.

# Putting the principles of decolonising aid into action

The Empowerment Support Fund is inspired by the following aid decolonisation principles, which reduce the systemic power hierarchies between funders and grantees.

## 💧 Control over local decisions lies with the communities and organizations of sanitation workers

The call for proposals invited organisations to suggest activities under the broad theme of sanitation workers' mobilisation. The specific objectives and scope of interventions were left for sanitation workers' organisations to define, based on the local context and community priorities. Throughout the implementation of activities, grantees were encouraged to keep the needs of sanitation workers at the centre by involving them in decision-making and taking regular feedback.

## 💧 Support tailored to local contexts and organisational capacities

Most of the supported organisations worked at the grassroots level, including some newly formed sanitation workers' groups. They were unfamiliar with the management of external funding and had limited proposal development capacity. Hence, an iterative process was followed, whereby ISW members were available to discuss plans, provide feedback or even to support proposal preparation in line with organisational requirements and capacities.

## 💧 Simple administrative and reporting processes

Fund disbursement, monitoring, review and reporting mechanisms were simple, flexible and presented in local languages. For instance, organisations had the option of sharing programme progress

through online meetings rather than written reports. ISW then supported them to prepare a very short project report. Partnership agreements were adapted, even mid-course, in line with the nature of each organisation and any local regulatory requirements. This reduced the administrative burden on these organisations and allowed them to focus their efforts on actual community mobilisation and advocacy priorities.

## 💧 Flexible and trust-based partnerships

Rather than the conventional hierarchical dynamics, ISW and the sanitation workers' organisations enjoyed a trust-based collaborative relationship, based on open and responsive communication. Flexibility in the fund design ensured that organisations could adapt programme structures and budgets at any time, thus allowing continuous learning and agile implementation.

## 💧 Enabling voices from the grassroots

In addition to financial support, ISW members supported sanitation workers' organisations by facilitating access to decision makers and key sector actors and by providing platforms for disseminating their work and messages at national and international fora. This enabled sanitation workers' representatives and advocates to voice their concerns and opinions to key stakeholders. ISW also organised peer-to-peer online exchange opportunities among these organisations.



# Successes

The work supported by the Empowerment Support Fund resulted in effective mobilisation and advocacy, especially in cases with dynamic leadership and connections with policymakers. Some notable outcomes include:

- ✓ **Strengthened networks:** The formation and growth of workers' groups, associations and networks enabled collective action and mutual support.
- ✓ **Enhanced advocacy skills:** Training programmes and regular participation in stakeholder engagement workshops equipped sanitation workers with the skills to directly raise their concerns with local administrators and policymakers.
- ✓ **Improved working conditions and recognition of rights:** In several cases, continued stakeholder engagement and advocacy efforts led to greater accountability of local governments resulting in improved measures for workplace safety and social protection.

For instance, in Pakistan, the Center for Law and Justice trained sanitation workers' leaders, and as a result, the workers unionised, forming the national [Sweepers' Association](#) of sewer cleaners. Their advocacy efforts also brought the rights of sanitation workers to public attention and onto policymakers' agendas, even reaching the regional Parliament.

In **Tanzania**, [Watu Kazi](#) was an informal group of pit emptiers that came together to build their skills and capacity to provide safe sanitation services.

With grant support, they were able to engage with diverse local and national actors, thus inspiring similar action in other cities, as well as efforts to form a national association of pit emptiers.

**Sanitation workers interacting with civil society and policy stakeholders at a capacity building workshop organised by the Center for Law and Justice, Pakistan.**



Center for Law and Justice





Emptying demonstration at a learning event by members of Watu Kazi and other groups.

**Vizhuthugal's** work in Tamil Nadu, **India**, helped manual sanitation workers and their families become aware of their rights and legal entitlements, engage with local officials, and demand support for their grievances.

Technical and financial support also allowed some individuals to transition to safer and more dignified livelihoods.

In **India**, **Thamate** expanded the grassroots community network of sanitation workers known as Safaikaramchari Kavalu Samiti (SKKS), which helped to strengthen community-led advocacy. Over time, community members have developed the confidence to raise their concerns directly with local stakeholders.

These efforts helped workers and their families access compensation for workplace injuries and deaths, and for free primary healthcare services.

**Nagorik Uddyog** helped bring the voices of Dalit sanitation workers to the forefront in Bangladesh. Their work resulted in greater awareness by workers of their entitlements, stronger engagement with decision makers, and collective advocacy for their rights.






In **Burkina Faso**, the mobilisation and advocacy efforts of **ABASE**, an association of pit emptiers, secured the official recognition of manual emptying by the authorities, with positive implications for workplace safety, business opportunities, and the dignity of workers.

## The Sweepers' Association Pakistan: a collective voice for the rights and dignity of sewer cleaners

Sanitation workers in Pakistan, predominantly from marginalised Christian communities, face hazardous working conditions, social discrimination, and lack of legal protections. Despite the critical contribution they make to public health, sanitation workers remain among the most vulnerable labour groups in the country. They are often employed informally to clean sewers and handle faecal waste without adequate protective measures, exposing them to serious health risks and fatal injuries, without employment rights and protections.

The Centre for Law and Justice (CLJ) has been working to address these issues through research, grassroots mobilisation and advocacy in support of sanitation workers' rights. In 2020, they supported the formation of a sewer cleaners' association in Lahore, which increased the visibility of workers with the authorities, indicating the need to upscale similar initiatives.

**During 2021-24, the CLJ received a grant of USD 59,000 from the ISW to expand their efforts through the following activities:**

-  **Identification and training of grassroots leaders:** CLJ identified 28 potential leaders across nine districts in the Punjab and Sindh provinces. They were trained on labour laws; civic, political and constitutional rights; good practices from other countries; and leadership skills.
-  **Breaking taboos:** During the national consultation, eight association leaders were honoured with Dignity Awards to acknowledge the contribution of sanitation workers to society. Furthermore, in the workshops and consultations, dignitaries sat with workers at mealtimes, thus breaking the taboos of 'impurity' and untouchability associated with sanitation work.
-  **Mobilisation of sanitation workers:** CLJ provided these grassroots leaders with in-kind support and technical assistance to help mobilise members from their communities. An association of more than 200 sanitation workers from 22 districts was formed.
-  **Strengthening community-led advocacy:** Training workshops and consultations have given workers an opportunity to voice their concerns related to their contractual engagement, poor working conditions, lack of employment security, and gaps in social security access. Association members across various cities now stay connected virtually to discuss these issues and to plan how to raise awareness of them through stakeholder meetings and social media use.
-  **National stakeholder consultation:** The association was formally launched in the presence of key stakeholders at a national consultation workshop. The meeting led to a resolution calling on the Government to ensure improved safety and a better standard of living for the workers.

The formation of the national association helped bring sanitation workers together, equipping them with the necessary skills, confidence, and public platforms to raise their concerns directly with local officials.





## From informal manual emptiers to emerging role models: the journey of Tanzania's Watu Kazi group

Several informal settlements in Tanzania rely on manual emptying, where mechanised emptying is not feasible. However, this essential service comes at significant cost to the health and safety of sanitation workers. The lack of formal recognition of this work, the inadequate safety provisions and limited technical capacities of the workers make this hazardous and hinders their business prospects.

In 2019, SNV and the local municipal authorities brought together manual emptiers in Shinyanga city, ten of whom registered formally as the Watu Kazi manual emptying group, the first formalised group in the municipality, and one of the first in the country. The group bought semi-mechanised Pitvaq machines and personal protective gear and opened a bank account with the support of SNV.

From 2022-24, the Watu Kazi group received two grants totalling USD 26,660 from the ISW. Given the group's lack of experience in grant management, SNV Tanzania's office provided essential administrative and technical assistance.

### The grants helped implement capacity building and stakeholder engagement including:

-  **Technical and business training:** Training sessions and exposure visits were conducted on themes such as operating semi-mechanised pit emptying equipment, customer relations, marketing, bookkeeping, tariff calculation, and loan application processes. This helped to make their work safer and enhanced their business acumen.
-  **National advocacy:** A national learning event was organised where Watu Kazi shared their experiences with government officials, the Occupational Safety and Health Authority (OSHA), manual emptiers, and the Pan African Association of Sanitation Actors (PASA). Discussions at this event led to the formation of a national platform of manual emptiers in Tanzania, to advocate jointly for their rights.
-  **Stakeholder engagement:** The group joined advocacy meetings with local municipal officials, ward officials, and water utility personnel. They also presented and showcased their work at several regional and national conferences, where local government officials from other municipalities were attending. Furthermore, radio sessions helped in creating awareness about their work among local communities.

With the help of the Empowerment Support Fund, the Watu Kazi group has been able to improve their workplace safety, business operations, and stakeholder engagement skills. Learning from their example, manual emptiers in four other cities have started to form similar groups. Mussa Bushele, the group chairperson, says **“We have had the opportunity to meet manual emptiers from other regions in the country, exchange ideas and experiences, but most importantly influence each other in a good and positive way. The sense of community from creating and being part of something bigger is motivating”.**



## Association Burkinabè pour l'Assainissement et la Sauvegarde de l'Environnement: Catalysing change through collective action in Burkina Faso

Until 2023, manual emptying in Burkina Faso had long been an unrecognised profession, even though it is essential in areas impossible to service by mechanical emptiers. The work requires entering deep pits and handling waste with bare hands, making workers prone to infectious diseases, injuries, and sometimes even death. Having no designated disposal sites, workers often have to illegally dump faecal waste near household premises or remote areas. Due to the fear and shame associated with this profession, they usually work at night.

**The Association Burkinabè pour l'Assainissement et la Sauvegarde de l'Environnement (Burkina Association for Sanitation and Safeguarding the Environment – ABASE) received USD 35,971 during 2022-24 from the Empowerment Support Fund to help with capacity building of manual emptiers and rights advocacy including:**

-  **Mobilisation of manual emptiers:** More manual emptiers were brought on board, with the association expanding from 25 to 41 core members.
-  **Public awareness:** The association also participated in radio broadcasts to create awareness of their work to improve public perceptions.
-  **Collective advocacy:** The association organised local and national advocacy workshops with the Ministry of Water and Sanitation, the International Institute for Water and Environmental Engineering (2IE – a research and higher education institute), and other national stakeholders in the sanitation sector.
-  **Countrywide mapping of manual emptiers:** Identification and mapping of informal manual emptying businesses in Ouagadougou (120), Bobo-Dioulasso (55) and Koudougou (40) led to their integration into the *Fédération des Acteurs de l'Assainissement du Burkina* (FAAB). Furthermore, a growing number of manual emptiers are now aware of ABASE and recognise its role in defending their rights. Membership requests have significantly increased.
-  **Capacity building:** Manual emptiers received training sessions on safe emptying practice and were taken on an exposure visit to Côte d'Ivoire.

ABASE's regular advocacy efforts helped paved the way for the official recognition of manual emptiers by the authorities and resulted in much-needed changes in their working environment. They can now work openly during the day, without fear or shame.

The association uses member contributions to source personal protective equipment and organise vaccinations, which have improved workplace safety. Consequently, the association has been awarded a desludging contract by the Ministry, which has boosted their income opportunities.

# Lessons learned and limitations

## Learnings

- 💧 **Flexibility:** The consultative, iterative and flexible nature of the fund was helpful in adapting funding processes to the diverse contexts and needs of different organisations. This allowed both ISW and the sanitation workers' organisations to learn as they went along and effectively adapt to emerging challenges and priorities. For instance, in Tanzania, though the initial proposal focussed on local advocacy work, the need for national-level advocacy was identified during implementation. Hence, additional funds were allocated to support a national learning and stakeholder engagement workshop.
- 💧 **Making space for risks:** As an innovative fund, there was higher-level risk and uncertainty, which it was important to acknowledge from the outset. For instance, when the support provided to one organisation had to be discontinued due to operational challenges, a shared understanding between ISW and BMGF that innovation and risk are two sides of the same coin, helped to navigate the situation.
- 💧 **Engaging with local NGOs:** ISW's initial intention was to fund sanitation workers' groups directly. However, it soon became clear that the capacity and level of organisation of sanitation workers was lower than expected. In five of the seven instances, there needed to be a greater reliance on the engagement of local NGOs that supported sanitation workers. In hindsight, this should have been anticipated as these informal workers can often face systemic discrimination and need an additional layer of support.

## Limitations

- 💧 **Short-term funding support:** The short time frames due to upstream funding meant that ISW could support activities for up to a year initially. This was later extended but only for a further 18 months. Funding for short time periods has been an impediment to envisaging any long-term plan and sustained momentum. Hence, short-term grants led to constraints around the scope, scale and continuity of activities implemented.
- 💧 **Geographical constraints:** For operational reasons, proposals were invited only from countries where either WaterAid or SNV had a presence. Moreover, the level of non-monetary support provided by ISW varied depending on the country due to limited availability of ISW member staff.
- 💧 **Limited localisation:** The fact that the fund was managed by a global coalition of international institutions contradicts the principles of decolonisation to a certain extent. Ideally, national or regional entities should manage national-level funds, further localising resources and decision-making power. However, funding constraints and limited capacity or lack of suitable national or regional entities led to this global setup.

## The case for continued support to sanitation workers' groups

Sanitation workers are subject to systemic discrimination and receive limited assistance from governments, mainstream unions and wider society. The Empowerment Support Fund demonstrates the value of investing in sanitation workers' grassroots movements, in supporting them to drive change and achieving a disproportionate impact for limited funding over just three years. Thus, there is a strong case for support from stakeholders in the sanitation, labour and human rights sector, as well as from donors and philanthropists.

The health, safety and dignity of sanitation workers is an issue of human rights, but it is also crucial for achieving the ambitions of safely managed sanitation and the promotion of decent work, as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goals 6 and 8 respectively. Strengthening the sanitation workforce is a crucial part of the agenda to accelerate sanitation progress.

Donors, development agencies and WASH organisations willing to advance the ambition of sanitation services for all and/or to support the rights of sanitation workers can take inspiration from the Empowerment Support Fund and consider the following recommendations.

Since most of these go against conventional grant-making and aid accountability mechanisms, they will require radical reimagining of ways of thinking and working to be applied at scale.

- 💧 **Centre sanitation workers' priorities:** Decentralise decision-making, ensuring that sanitation workers and their representatives set the agenda and priorities.
- 💧 **Simplify processes:** Streamline grant selection, contracting and reporting procedures to make funding more accessible to grassroots organisations, who need these forms of support the most.
- 💧 **Stay flexible:** Support iterative and flexible funding models that accommodate emerging needs and priorities, thereby allowing space for calculated risks and the time for collaborative decision-making.
- 💧 **Provide non-monetary support:** Funding should be accompanied by technical and convening/networking support.
- 💧 **Commit to the long-term:** Due to the complex and deep-rooted challenges sanitation workers face, long-term investment is needed to strengthen their capacities and tackle systemic changes at the policy level.

**Community gathering of sanitation workers facilitated by Thamate, India.**



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