

Urban work



Since May 2007 more people have lived in towns and cities than rural areas for the first time in history. The growth of urban areas is rapidly increasing through rural to urban migration and internal population growth.

In the developing world, many urban areas are unplanned, densely populated and unserved by even the most basic water and sanitation infrastructure. Families live surrounded by raw sewage, drink unsafe water from polluted sources, or pay dearly for water from illegal vendors. As a result, water-related diseases such as cholera, typhoid and dysentery run rife.

In response to this increasingly severe challenge, WaterAid has pledged to expand its urban work to help reach more of the world's poorest people.



Brent Sturton

Children play with filthy water from a canal in Madagascar's capital city Antananarivo.

Rising to the urban challenge



WaterAid/Marco Betti

Residents of the slum area Khanjibaba in the Indian city Gwalior dig a ditch for a new sewer.

Water

Where there is no safe water supply, people either walk long distances in search of water, collect it from polluted sources such as factory outflows or unprotected wells, or buy jerry cans of water, often of dubious quality, from vendors at vastly inflated prices. The poorest people from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, spend an average of 10% of their income on water from vendors. They pay much more per litre than the better off, who can secure piped connections or afford to invest in their own wells.

Water scarcity means poor families are only able to use a small amount of water, which affects their ability to wash themselves, their homes and their clothes. They are also hindered from washing by the lack of privacy. The inability to wash furthers the spread of disease and undermines dignity.

In areas with high population density there is increased chance of groundwater pollution, and so hand-dug wells, commonly built in rural areas, are unsuitable. While tubewells that reach deeper water sources can be a viable option, often the preferable solution is to negotiate with existing piped water suppliers, usually the municipality, to extend services into unserved areas and establish communal water points that the community can manage themselves. Nominal fees are charged per bucket collected, which are paid into a fund used to pay the water bills and cover maintenance.

Sanitation

A lack of toilets means that people have no option but to defecate openly, polluting the environment with hazardous, stinking, raw sewage. For women adhering to strict standards of modesty, finding somewhere private to go to the toilet is often near to impossible. Many people resort to using plastic bags that are thrown away. These ‘flying toilets’ typically end up clogging and polluting drainage channels.

As there is often no room to build household pit latrines, and high usage of pit latrines in densely populated areas could risk contamination of the water table, WaterAid’s urban sanitation solutions usually involve communal toilet blocks draining into cesspits or municipal sewers. Users pay a monthly fee or a small charge per use. Sometimes, as in Pakistan, communities build miles of their own sewers in unplanned areas, which connect to the city’s main sewer lines.



Elizabeth Banda collects water from a communal water point in Malawi’s capital Lilongwe.

Hygiene and environmental sanitation

In urban areas, hygiene education stressing the importance of safe water and effective sanitation is especially important. WaterAid’s sanitation work also includes drainage, footpath construction, and solid waste (rubbish) management, all of which help to minimise risks to public health.

Advocacy work

With such huge numbers without access to water and sanitation WaterAid’s country programmes also lobby for governments to reform urban water utilities. This includes ensuring that agreed obligations to expand affordable water and sanitation services into unserved areas are met. WaterAid also lobbies governments to increase resources for sanitation, which is often given considerably lower political priority than water.



The ‘great stench’ in Dhaka, Bangladesh

“Charles Dickens would have felt at home in the streets of Dhaka. The barefoot children waiting for their mothers and sisters to come home from the textile mills; the chimneys of the brick factories, like a throwback to the pages of Bleak House, vaguely visible in the smog. And the stench.

“Like Victorian London, the shanty towns of Bangladesh’s capital reek of excrement dropped from makeshift hanging toilets perched precariously on bamboo stilts a couple of metres above the mire.”

Larry Elliott, Economics Editor, The Guardian, 26 November 2007

Victory for slum dwellers



The March 2007 water bill addressed to the community of Bauniabadh Kalabagan in Dhaka, Bangladesh was cause for celebration. The bill was the very first issued directly by the Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (DWASA) to a community lacking legal land tenure. Until 1992, DWASA had refused to supply water at all to unofficial communities. Then, following negotiation with WaterAid's local partner DSK, they agreed to supply water to communal water points if DSK acted as guarantor.

Fifteen years of experience proved that a guarantor was unnecessary: slum dwellers were reliable bill payers who preferred paying a fair price to the authority for safe, clean water to paying higher prices for suspect water sold by illegal providers. The removal of DSK as a guarantor paves the way for other communities in unofficial settlements to gain legitimate access to safe water.

Communal latrines



Land is at a premium in Muganzi Luwaza, on the outskirts of Uganda's capital city, Kampala. With no room to build new pit latrines, WaterAid and local partner YIFODA helped the community to build a permanent block of communal latrines draining into a tank that could be emptied by a suction vehicle. Community latrine committee member Silvia Kiewao explained:

"People only have small plots of land here and there is no room to build new pit latrines once their old pits have filled up. This latrine block is leased to different families, it serves 300 people. There are 20 households that lease a cubicle and there are two cubicles for visitors. Households pay a fee to use it which goes towards maintenance and the cost of emptying the tank."

Mobile toilet kiosks



By managing one of WaterAid and local partner organisation GAMA's innovative 'mobile toilets', 27 year old Eskender Tadesse from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, is helping provide much needed privacy for local residents to go to the toilet.

"When I came to Addis Ababa I had no work and was living on the street. Then I got involved with helping to clean and green the area and the mobile toilet.

"Between 70 and 80 people use this toilet every day. Sometimes if people have no money I will let them in for free, so that we can keep the area clean. I also have a special box for children to stand on so that they can use the latrine. When there is a special occasion in the city we can transfer the latrine to where it is needed."



WaterAid's mission is to overcome poverty by enabling the world's poorest people to gain access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene education.



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Registered charity numbers 288701 (England and Wales)
and SC039479 (Scotland). February 2009