

# **VOICES OF THE VULNERABLE ON WASH SERVICES**

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**Freshwater Action Network  
South Asia**

# VOICES OF THE VULNERABLE ON WASH SERVICES

## CHANNELING WASH FINANCES TOWARDS REALIZATION OF UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES FOR ACHIEVING HEALTH, QUALITY OF LIFE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

### SYNTHESIS OF THE EVIDENCE GATHERED FROM COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS ACROSS SOUTH ASIA LED BY FANSA

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) has been always spoken about as a 'basic prerequisite'. However, the fact that over half of the world population is deprived of safe water, sanitation-hygiene leading to a vicious spin of poverty and ill-health, indicates that this intention has not been converted into actual practice. WASH has also been recognized widely as a 'cross-cutting' service needed by all, but in reality, it is often considered to be the responsibility of one or at best a few 'departments'.

The COVID 19 pandemic has precipitated unprecedented crises across all sectors, WASH included. Progressive understanding regarding the disease and its impacts has demonstrated that safe Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) is essential for controlling the pandemic as well as for rebuilding the economies. This implies a stronger, coordinated and convergent approach to WASH, cutting across geographic and sectoral boundaries, aimed at creating safer conditions for all.

The need for such convergent action was reiterated in the virtual Asia-Pacific Finance Ministers' Meeting (FMM), organized by Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) on the 2nd of Dec 2020. There was a strong realization as well as endorsement by the Ministers that safe WASH is an essential prerequisite for protecting Public Health. The leaders also reaffirmed commitment to improve the fund allocation, utilization efficiency and accountability in WASH sector to ensure access to WASH services for the vulnerable.

Freshwater Action Network South Asia (FANSA), an umbrella network of Civil Society Organizations in South Asia and a partner of SWA, as a preparatory exercise for FMM, compiled the voices of the grassroots through a series of grass-root level engagements (Focus Group Discussions – FDGs), and ensured that their voices reach these decisionmakers.

| COUNTRY      | NO. OF FGDS | TOTAL PARTICIPANTS |
|--------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Afghanistan  | 13          | 96                 |
| Bangladesh   | 20          | 230                |
| Bhutan       | 9           | 165                |
| India        | 21          | 473                |
| Nepal        | 13          | 174                |
| Pakistan     | 14          | 335                |
| Sri Lanka    | 6           | 53                 |
| <b>TOTAL</b> | <b>96</b>   | <b>1526</b>        |



This Policy Brief has been prepared by synthesis of the key findings from the grassroots consultations (see table) and the deliberations of the FMM and captures the collective learnings which can guide and strengthen policies and programs for

- Effective identification and targeting of vulnerable groups
- Developing specific strategies for overcoming the barriers to WASH access
- Understanding 'Key Asks' related to WASH from the perspective of the vulnerable communities so that contextually appropriate, cost-effective measures can be undertaken to address the felt-needs

**FANSA calls for a concerted, convergent multistakeholder effort to ensure equitable and inclusive progress on water, sanitation and hygiene targets of Sustainable Development Goals, so that NO ONE IS LEFT BEHIND.**

## COMMON OBSERVATIONS FROM ALL THE VULNERABLE GROUPS, FROM ACROSS THE SEVEN COUNTRIES

The discussions among the specific vulnerable groups in different locations of the South Asia have revealed various issues which are diverse, typical and unique in nature requiring specific actions with appropriate budget allocations and the same have been synthesized for each of the vulnerable groups.

### “WHAT MAKES US VULNERABLE AND KEEPS US VULNERABLE”

#### **‘Nobody asks, Nobody listens’**

- A sense of despair that they are not given due consideration and a cynicism that Duty Bearers don't respond when we ask for what we are entitled to”

#### **“We can't navigate the maze...and keep running from pillar to post”**

- Despite many well-intentioned schemes, the systems and procedures for implementation are often too complicated and fragmented making it difficult to access the benefits– all the more so for the vulnerable populations like the Persons With Disabilities (PWDs), the Elderly, the illiterate and the marginalized.

#### **“We are happy that the whole world is progressing– but when will our time come?”**

- Lack of opportunities for progress and participation due to stigma, persecution and inherent inequities, perpetuating marginalization.
- Lack of and access to disaggregated data – so many groups don't even 'exist' – Averages mask the Inequities!

#### **“Survival First, Luxuries Next”**

- WASH is most basic– and makes or mars ALL other services.

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SYSTEM

### **FIRST THINGS FIRST – ENSURE BASIC AMENITIES**

- WASH services are among the most essential prerequisites which can enable comprehensive growth – be it agriculture, industry or business.

### **STRENGTHEN PARTICIPATION in DECISION MAKING BY THE VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**

- Institutionalize participation and decision making for the vulnerable communities in planning, implementation and monitoring of WASH interventions at all levels of governance.

### **STRENGTHEN THE HANDS OF THE IMPLEMENTORS**

- Sensitize and train the agencies responsible for delivering WASH services regarding needs and rights of vulnerable communities.

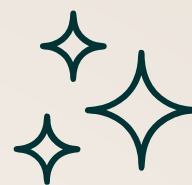
### **PRIORITIZE BUILDING HUMAN AND SOCIAL CAPITAL**

- Build capacities of people and people's organizations to catalyze and lead behavior change, innovate in social enterprise and take lead in monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

### **ENSURE A ROBUST SYSTEM TO MEASURE, ANALYZE, LEARN AND SHARE EXPERIENCES**

- Develop a robust, interlinked data management system which would enable tracking progress in multiple dimensions of development, with focus on short-term outputs as well as long term outcomes.

# SANITATION WORKERS



**“We have been working harder to keep everyone safe from COVID but continue to face multiple risks including poor access to WASH facilities”**

- Organized Sanitation Workers
- Rag and Waste pickers
- Workers in Public toilets
- Sewerage line maintenance workers
- Workers in Waste treatment units
- Workers in Solid Waste Management units
- Workers handling Health Care Waste
- Workers involved in Manual Scavenging

**17 FGDS IN  
7 COUNTRIES**



## UNDERSTANDING THE VULNERABILITY

- **“We clean the whole world, but how about our own cleanliness”** – Sanitation workers are the foot soldiers for keeping the world clean, but they live in very squalid conditions.
- **“Everything we touch, and handle is potentially harmful, yet there is no protection”** – Sanitation workers are highly exposed to toxic materials as they handle waste from toilets, sewage lines, solid waste collection and management sites, hospitals, diagnostic labs and waste treatment plants etc. but their access to safety gear is abysmally low.
- **“We are needed for everybody's Health, but how about our own health?”** – There is absolutely no safety net for ensuring Health and safety of the Sanitation Workers, despite the risks that they are exposed to.
- **“No guarantee of payment for work done, no guarantee of continuation of work”** – Though an essential service from the community point of view, the Sanitation Workers neither have any job security, nor have been consistently or adequately compensated.

## RECOMMENDED SPECIFIC ACTIONS:

### ENSURE MANDATORY PERSONAL PROTECTION

- Provision of Personal Protection Equipment kits by the respective employers to be made compulsory, along with training and monitoring of the usage of the same.

### PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE HEALTH AND INSURANCE COVER FOR ALL SANITATION WORKERS

- Provide for full coverage of hospital expenses starting from diagnosis to the full treatment so that it is not a burden to these economically backward classes.
- All category of sanitation workers, in the formal and informal sector, to be given due protection under a comprehensive insurance policy that covers medical, life and accidental risks.

# PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES



**“Our WASH needs are rarely considered by the duty bearers and are often neglected by our own families”**

- Visually impaired
- Speech and Hearing Impaired
- Orthopedically handicapped
- Cerebral palsy affected
- Neuro-muscular disabilities
- Post-Trauma spinal injury
- Amputees
- Other disabilities
- Family members, care givers of the PWDs

**23 FGDS IN  
7 COUNTRIES**



## UNDERSTANDING THE VULNERABILITY

- **'Can't do it alone'** – High dependence on 'others' for WASH needs makes us feel shy and guilty
- **'We need more, but get less'** – Water, sanitation and Hygiene needs for PWDs are higher, but in reality, they get much less.
- **Facility Available, yet NOT accessible** – Most public WASH facilities are 'Inaccessible' for PWDs
- **'No response to our cry for help'** – Lack of response or awareness from families, community and Governments.

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

- Undertake systematic mapping (data base) and beneficiary targeting
- Develop guidelines and designs for the disability-specific and context-specific wash needs of the pwards, including times of disaster with robust monitoring and accountability to track inclusiveness
- Design holistic & inclusive development plans with livelihoods as central theme of all covid recovery plans with dedicated budgets and monitoring plans for full utilization by national, state and local governments.
- Ensure inclusivity in all behavior change communications materials, and in other dissemination materials developed – so that visually impaired and hearing impaired are also reached



# URBAN SHANTY DWELLERS



**“We built the city with our bare hands... isn't it ironic that we are now fully left behind and don't even have decent house to stay?”**

- Residents of urban slums
- Residents of non-formal settlements within the city limits
- Residents of peri urban settlements

**22 FGDS IN  
7 COUNTRIES**



## UNDERSTANDING THE VULNERABILITY

### **Classic case of 'Poverty Amid Plenty'**

Slums right in the middle of the glamour of urban progress, where people are deprived of even basic amenities

### **Crowding, cesspools, poor WASH, poor nutrition, risky jobs...**

Unhygienic living conditions which predispose residents to poor health and high risks of disease.

### **Houses hardly have walls and doors, let alone toilets**

So no question of privacy and dignity specially for women and girls.

### **Nonfunctioning or malfunctioning WASH services**

Low in quantity, zero in quality and poor access overall!

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

- Wash needs to be 'basic' prerequisite with development plans for all the urban pockets with inclusion of dedicated budgets and sub-plans for integrated wash development.
- The settlements to be recognised as legal and provide acceptable housing to people living in unrecognized settlements.
- Develop designs and technologies appropriate for space-constraints and other contextual limitations.
- Wash service delivery standards should be on par with the norms followed for other areas, and there should be continuous monitoring of the same
- Promote community champions, build leadership and participation of shanty dwellers in delivery and monitoring of wash services.



## PEOPLE LIVING IN HARD TO REACH AREAS (DISASTER PRONE/TRIBAL/REMOTE AMONG OTHERS)

**“We suffer from long spells of disruption to WASH services as the infrastructure in our settlements is damaged due to recurring floods and cyclones”**

- People in flood prone areas
- Cyclone affected
- Coastal areas
- Earthquake prone areas
- High rainfall
- Areas of industries and other polluters
- Low lying settlements

19 FGDS IN  
6 COUNTRIES



## UNDERSTANDING THE VULNERABILITY

- **Most marginalized and worst hit:** More often than not, it is the people from marginalized communities who live in disaster-prone/remote/tribal areas and the calamities hit them hard.
- **Loss of lives, livelihoods, property:** not once but repeated incidents make them more vulnerable
- **Damage of WASH infrastructure:** With every calamity the WASH infrastructure is adversely affected/damaged interrupting the service delivery.
- **Poor ability to recover** from the losses and vicious cycle of deprivation, poverty and enhanced vulnerability.

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

### INCORPORATE CLIMATE RESILIENCE INTO WASH STRATEGIES

- National level action plans on climate change, disaster management and WASH need to be aligned to promote overall integration of climate resilience into the WASH strategies. This also need to ensure that investments made and progress achieved on WASH are equitable and sustainable.

### LEVERAGE FINANCIAL RESOURCES FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES

- To develop climate resilient WASH infrastructure National Governments, need to develop strategies to pool required financial resources from national budgets, public finances and support from external agencies.
- The estimate & standard schedule of rates to be revised dynamically to suite to the geographic context.

### FOCUS ON BUILDING CAPACITIES OF THE SECTOR FOR CLIMATE RESILIENT WASH

- Building Human Capacities across all tiers is a must – from the Policymakers to the local governments and even grassroots organizations. Hence, there is a need for a substantial increase in allocations meant to build the capacities of WASH sector in risk assessment viz in planning, implementation and monitoring of climate resilient WASH solutions.

### INVOLVE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION TO ENHANCE CLIMATE RESILIENCE

- Local communities in the climate-risk areas need to be capacitated to constructively engage themselves in sustainable maintenance of the climate resilient WASH solutions created at the local level.



## MIGRANTS, HOMELESS

**“we work and starve – so that our nears and dears who live far away can survive.”**

**The COVID lockdown period caused worst suffering to us as we were deprived of WASH services in pavement life as well as in temporary shelters**

- Migrant communities and groups
- Families of migrant workers
- Destitute, Homeless persons
- Construction workers
- Workers engaged in road repairs and maintenance
- Migrants working in urban establishments hotels, etc.

**12 FGDS IN  
6 COUNTRIES**



## UNDERSTANDING THE VULNERABILITY

**“Footpaths are our home away from home.”**

- stricken and driven by poverty they migrate to cities in search of livelihoods and make meagre amounts. They live on footpaths to save money.

**“we have nobody as our own – except for each other...”**

- Abandoned and uncared for, the homeless individuals are exposed to constant risks of hunger, disease and exploitation

**Exploited and underpaid...**

- Much of their meagre earnings are saved and sent to their native places so that their family members can be fed

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

### **DUE RECOGNITION OF THE PROBLEM**

- Need for appropriate quantification and analysis of the magnitude and diversity of the issues regarding Homeless and Migrant population. It must be supported by disaggregated data

### **PROVIDE FOR INCLUSION OF HOMELESS UNDER RELEVANT EXISTING SCHEME**

- Identification, validation and inclusion of the homeless and of the migrant workers to be able to access services under various development programs being implemented

### **ENSURE GUARANTEED BASIC AMENITIES INCLUDING WASH SERVICES**

- WASH facilities to be integrated irrespective of their status and equal access to be ensured

### **LEVERAGE SUPPORT FROM MULTIPLE SOURCES**

- Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives, NGOs and Citizens welfare associations must be involved to improve the conditions of the homeless people.





## LGBTIQ COMMUNITIES

**REJECTED, YES; DEJECTED, YES. BUT NOT DEFEATED!**

**We keep fighting for our rights. We are denied of WASH services due to neglect and discrimination by the service providers and society at large:**

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Transgenders
- Other sexual minorities
- Welfare associations of such individuals

**3 FGDS IN  
2 COUNTRIES**



## UNDERSTANDING THE VULNERABILITY

**Facing humiliation and rejection has become a normal thing...** Rejected and thrown out by their own families, the LGBTIQ communities are nobody's people....

**'We are like anybody else, but are pushed out by Both men and women..** Basic needs are no different but strong stigma attached to the community precludes inclusion into the mainstream

**Members live in groups in squalid conditions in small and ill-serviced 'houses' –** with hardly any water-sanitation

**'Nobody even tries to understand us...let alone empathize with us...** Already in shock, denial and turmoil internally, they suffer enormous emotional agony – worsened many fold by the utter insensitivity of the so called mainstream

**physically, socially, economically, sexually –** we are exploited in all ways... and society calls US abnormal!

## RECOMMENDED ACTIONS:

### CREATE PUBLIC AWARENESS AND ADDRESS STIGMA

- Urgent action to create public awareness and nurture a broader inclusive outlook in the community

### ESTABLISH INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISM FOR ALL-ROUND MAINSTREAMING, WITH WASH SERVICES AS A BASIC PREREQUISITE

- WASH rights of the sexual minorities cannot be achieved in isolation without states initiating decisive actions for promoting the social and political rights of these persons.
- Ensure inclusive wash services in public places and in community homes where lgbtq reside

### DEFINE DISCRIMINATORY BEHAVIOUR AND MAKE SUCH PRACTICES PUNISHABLE

- Map out practices of discrimination against sexual minorities, especially in delivery of WASH services and necessary protective measures should be initiated to eliminate such practices.

### CREATE INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR FACILITATION AND SUPPORT

- National and sub-national level advisory bodies including representatives of LGBTIQ communities to understand, incorporate and implement the special needs of sexual minorities