



Photos: Oxfam in Pakistan

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN PAKISTAN

Participatory governance in urban WASH

The urban context in Pakistan is complex and poses major risks for the most vulnerable groups. Following the results of a participatory analysis, Oxfam developed a strategy for improving urban WASH governance and accountability in Pakistan. The model is centred on citizens, with strong elements for influencing and networking. The inclusion of social accountability mechanisms is already showing results in terms of the accountability of local administrations and improved service delivery, particularly to women and vulnerable groups.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan about 39 percent of the population lives in urban areas.¹ Cities are rapidly expanding, outpacing the capacity of the government to provide adequate basic services. Frequently, this expansion happens in the form of slums or informal settlements, which lack all the basic urban services and opportunities to prosper. Over the years, governments have been unable to bring any significant reforms that would improve urban governance and empower the local administration to manage this unprecedented growth.

Authorities are finding it particularly challenging to keep up with the increasing demand for clean water and sanitation facilities for the urban poor. Many urban citizens have access to only contaminated water for drinking. This creates serious public health issues, mainly in the form of water-borne diseases such as diarrhoea.

The role of women and children as important stakeholders in identification, execution and monitoring of water supply and sanitation initiatives is not being practiced as given in national drinking water and sanitation policies. Women in urban areas are responsible for storing and treating water for drinking purposes, and for cleaning and maintaining the latrines.

The Oxfam WASH governance analysis study done in 2015 revealed that government officials in the two sample cities (Muzaffargarh, Punjab province; and Dadu, Sindh province) had very limited knowledge about WASH-related national strategies, policies and legislation. Officers know about the new Local Government Act 2013, but are not fully aware of their responsibilities under it. The policies and new legislation require local-level planning, but difficulties persist, since the provincial department decides the allocation and prioritization of funds. At the provincial level, the issues of urban WASH are overseen by multiple departments, which results in ad-hoc WASH planning, blurred zones of responsibility, overlapping of roles and responsibilities, and complicates monitoring and reporting.

Moreover, public participation in the political sphere in Pakistan is very limited for some vulnerable groups, particularly women. Women in urban areas know the importance of their votes in local elections, but they are strongly influenced by their male relatives. According to the women consulted during the Oxfam WASH governance analysis of 2015, local bodies are important means to share their views and some of them approach government offices if these are located in their neighbourhood. Indeed, some of the women are willing to take an active role in local politics, decision making and engagement with duty bearers, provided that an enabling environment is facilitated.

In preparing its urban programme strategy, Oxfam performed a participatory analysis to better understand the issues, challenges and opportunities for addressing urban poverty. The analysis combined information from three parallel approaches: (1) a desk review by urban experts to identify drivers of urbanization and good practice; (2) consultation with different stakeholders, including urban planners, policy makers, government representatives, CSOs, academia, media and development practitioners, and (3) participatory poverty and vulnerability assessments to include the needs of the local communities, since they are the ultimate target group of the programme.

During the participatory analysis, Oxfam supported citizens to analyse their problems using different participatory tools and helped them to prioritize top issues. Participants highlighted problems such as the accumulation of solid waste and stagnated water in front of their houses, problems related to access, quality and price of water, and children falling sick due to water-related diseases. The results indicated that poor water and sanitation services and related prevalence of health problems are pressing issues for communities.

2 OXFAM'S STRATEGY

Following the results of the participatory analysis, Oxfam developed a strategy for improving urban WASH governance and accountability in Pakistan. The objective is to decrease water-borne diseases among women and children through improved participatory urban governance.

Oxfam's strategy includes a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches. On one hand, poor urban communities are being empowered to demand their rights and effective WASH governance mechanisms and services from duty bearers. On the other hand, advocacy and governance approaches are being used with public and private sector entities and directed towards improving policy making, planning and equitable distribution of resources.

The urban governance and accountability model is citizen-centred, with strong elements for influencing and networking. The model does not need much resource to achieve lasting changes, since it encourages effective use of existing public financial resources through participative governance and social accountability. The strategy includes linking community practices and local-level governance with provincial and national policy. Some key elements are: promoting women's leadership, empowering communal ownership, enhancing social accountability, increasing budgetary allocation, supporting open and recreation spaces for slum dwellers, and improving quality and access of WASH services. The programme is proving very effective for influencing evidence-based pro-poor and women-friendly urban policies, strategies and implementation.

The approach includes: social accountability activities oriented to create community structures; initiating a platform of exchange with the authorities, and subsequently aiming for the following three key achievements:

- Effective and community-oriented allocation of public funds;
- Accountability of the government;
- Co-financing schemes with proper distribution of roles and responsibilities between the community and the local government.

The following section describes some of the key social accountability activities adopted to achieve this.

Effective citizen groups

Oxfam started mobilizing youth, women and men into local governance structures, called 'effective citizen groups' (ECG). ECGs analyse the needs and problems in

their community and prioritize key issues. Following this exercise, ECGs representatives meet with authorities and providers, and ensure that their needs are taken into account in the design of the development plans. Oxfam and its local partners have also sensitized communities through ECGs on their rights.

In order to ensure that community needs are addressed, the ECGs model relies on the following leverage points:

1. ECGs, service providers and authorities work together to develop realistic urban development plans for their areas, along with action plans and clear description of roles and responsibilities by all stakeholders. Importantly, it is the government which finally approves and signs off the plans, which ensures ownership.
2. A participatory monitoring and evaluation (PME) group, including ECGs, authorities, media and civil society organizations (CSO), is responsible for monitoring and implementation. ECGs and PMEs are trained in social accountability tools such as collection of information, budget tracking or use of feedback mechanisms, so they know where to go and how to proceed if an issue arises.
3. Finally, media participation has proven very powerful. Press conferences and articles oriented to promote critical thinking and raise public awareness has proven very effective in holding duty-bearers accountable.

To ensure that women's voices are heard, separate groups for women were also formed. Women ECGs have helped to empower women so their voices are heard and their public health concerns are addressed (see examples below).

As a result of the ECGs work, the organized women and men are effectively ensuring that their needs are included in the development of plans and are rigorously following up with the administration (see examples below).

ICT-based governance and social accountability

Oxfam designed an ICT-based urban portal to incorporate an information collection and management system to input into evidence-based decision making and provide opportunities for influencing decision making processes. This activity aims to develop urban growth management plans for the cities of Muzaffargarh and Dadu, which have high levels of ownership from the government, communities and other relevant stakeholders.

To support citizens to get the information they need and to hold the government accountable for services, the programme also upgraded the government's website² which now includes development plans, budget allocations, the contact details of officials, and informative packages on laws and acts.

3 OXFAM'S IMPACT

Below are some concrete examples of the impact of the social accountability activities and processes. The structures and processes created are already becoming a self-sustaining system that will continue even after Oxfam has left the area. In the next two years, Oxfam's urban programme will be working in neighbouring districts and will continue to promote the local anchoring of the interventions.

Overall programme quality

The inclusion of social accountability mechanisms is already showing results in terms of the accountability of local administrations and improved service delivery.

A total of 104 ECGs were formed in the targeted areas. These groups were quite successful in following up with the local administrations and received improved service delivery. Their identification of priority WASH needs was discussed with the local authorities, consolidated and finalized into Union Council development plans, which later fed into the Annual Development Plans of the targeted districts. The ECGs model is highly valued by the communities, as shown by the success of ECG members in local government elections.

ECGs have been also quite successful in monitoring the performance of providers and holding them accountable. For example, issues of 'ghost workers' and absence of cleaning staff were effectively addressed in response to requests and complaints by the community, Tehsil Municipal Administration in the city of Muzaffargarh terminated 245 remiss sanitation workers and hired new staff.

A key result has been that, during 2015–16, the government allocated a budget for certain schemes developed by ECGs. For example, in the targeted areas, the local government has started investing in drinking water filtration plants to address the needs identified in the development plans created by the local ECG groups.

In recognition of the programme's expertise in urban issues, Oxfam has been invited to be part of the National Habitat Steering Committee, which is responsible for the development of the National Urban Policy. This places Oxfam in an excellent position to provide pro-poor inputs on major government initiatives.

Stories of success: Building together

Mobilizing the community to make the government act

Gul Muhammad runs a small tool shop in Mohalla Shahwala, Muzaffargarh city, Punjab province. He was elected as the chairman of the union council ECG. The condition of the street was poor and sewerage water was flowing. Gul not only submitted 125 applications to local departments and followed up with the local municipality for regular cleaning, but also mobilized the community to keep the streets clean. With Oxfam's support, a 180 foot-long drainage system was built and streets were paved. The community contributed in the form of labour and worked hand in hand with the government engineers to build a state-of-the art scheme. Gul has recently received a donation of 80,000 Rupees from a local philanthropist for street pavements and drainage systems for the rest of the area.

Vulnerable groups

In Pakistan, the Oxfam urban programme targets the most vulnerable groups in the city. Accordingly, the programme focuses in areas with the highest density of informal settlements within the target cities.

The beneficiaries of the programme are diverse and varied, including religious and sexual minorities. Particular attention has been given to low-income individuals with limited or no access to basic WASH services, health services or livelihood opportunities; people with disabilities or chronic diseases; and those who have little connection with or representation in government departments and the private sector.

From the onset, social accountability mechanisms proved to be very powerful to empower these vulnerable groups. The exercise under the participatory poverty and vulnerability assessment was particularly interesting. Indeed, for many the participants it was the first time anyone had expressed an interest in knowing about their lives and daily needs.

Stories of success: Supporting minorities

Empowering minorities in urban development

Shaani is a transgender person from Muzaffargarh, Punjab province. The society in Pakistan is very traditional and transgender people are not allowed to engage in economic and social activities. Supported by Oxfam, Shaani has helped other transgender people to get a place in the community and also helped to resolve many community issues through the ECG. Shaani runs a small training centre to help other transgender people to gain some livelihood skills. Legal aid and shelter are also provided to homeless and destitute transgender people. After the Mohalla sewerage line collapsed, Shaani led a response using the ECGs platform and coordinating with the local administration. The 40m sewerage line was reconstructed and earth filling was carried out. Gaining confidence from these experiences, Shaani lodged an application for information to the District Commission Officer under the Right to Information Act to follow up on the verdict given by the Supreme Court urging local governments to facilitate transgender people to find respectable jobs. The application was filed to Punjab Chief Information Commissioner who took immediate notice and instructed district authorities to respond and take action.

Empowerment of women

The ECG programme has successfully promoted issues of equality, and encouraged women's leadership and rights. Empowered women were able to work collectively through a recognized structure to address and stop early childhood marriages, hold private companies accountable through the Consumer Protection Act and acquire recreational spaces in the target areas. This has resulted in the emergence of local women leaders who are now confident to voice their concerns and who are showing a keen interest in contesting positions in local government elections.

Stories of success: Women taking the lead

Shamshad

After Oxfam ran a hygiene promotion campaign in Muzaffargarh through women ECGs, a challenge emerged since there was no shop in the area where women could buy sanitary napkins. Due to cultural barriers, women would never go and ask a male shopkeeper for menstrual hygiene products.

The women's ECG came up with a solution. Shamshad, a poor woman of the community, who is also vice-chairperson of the ECG, was supported to open a home-based shop to sell sanitary napkins and other hygiene products. This has benefitted women in the community who can now easily buy napkins from Shamshad.

4 KEY LEARNINGS

- Social accountability mechanisms are effective in challenging the status quo and making the government sensitive to listening to the community.
- Promoting public transparency helps to hold the government to account.
- Empowerment of the community was key to making people aware of their rights and how to use these when challenging the government.
- The government needs actual data in order to take informed decisions. Evidence-based approaches are a powerful tool to hold decision makers accountable.
- Social accountability approaches are very cost-effective since they promote adequate and effective ways to use the existing resources from the government.
- Having an official and recognized platform can have an additional benefit, as it promotes confidence in raising issues within communities, not only about service provision, but also collectively highlighting social challenges in a recognized space available to all community members that previously did not exist, especially for marginalized groups and women. This is in itself a shift in social norms towards positive changes.

NOTES

1 World Bank (2015): <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS>

2 <http://muzaffargarh.gop.pk/>

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