The Power Of Collaborative Action
Transforming South Asia’s Sanitation Landscape
South Asia has seen an unprecedented rate of urbanization in the last few decades, with the urban population expected to rise by almost **250 million by 2030**. The majority of people living in cities in the region rely on onsite sanitation systems (OSS) such as septic tanks, pit latrines, or other containment structures which do not connect to centralized sewer networks. Further, it has been estimated that **90% of human waste remains untreated** in South Asia. The lack of sewer coverage and inadequate treatment of faecal waste across South Asian cities makes the safe management of human waste a crucial priority to ensure the health of the public and the environment.

Countries like India, Nepal and Bangladesh have faced numerous challenges over the years. As of 2015, India’s waste treatment infrastructure had the capacity to treat only **37% of the 62,000 MLD (million litres per day)** of human waste produced in urban areas. In Bangladesh, Dhaka was the only city to have a sewer system in 2016, which served 18% of the city. Nepal was able to achieve Open Defecation Free (ODF) status in 2019, however, since 11% of homes are connected to sewer lines with most of the population relying on on-site sanitation systems, there has been an increasing focus on prioritizing safe treatment and disposal of faecal waste.

However, over the past few years, these countries have made significant progress towards ensuring safe and inclusive sanitation. Bangladesh was declared ODF in 2015, and has since increased its budget for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WSH) to **BDT 106.87 billion ($1.12 billion)**. In India, **400+ Faecal Sludge Treatment Plants (FSTPs)** are being constructed to meet the treatment requirements in the country. Nepal has **scaled up the construction of FSTPs** and endorsed **key guidelines and standards for sustaining ODF outcomes** and moving beyond ODF towards integrated WSH service delivery across districts and municipalities. A catalyzing force behind the momentum in achieving inclusive sanitation outcomes as part of SDG 6 has been the driving force of Collaborative Action in these regions.
Power in Coalition
The Catalyzing Role of Collaborative Action

Collaborative action has emerged as the catalyzing factor driving the rapid advancement of sanitation in these countries. The NFSSM Alliance in India, CWIS Alliance in Nepal and the FSM Network in Bangladesh have brought together diverse stakeholders ranging from government officials, funders and sanitation experts to create an enabling environment for City-Wide Inclusive Sanitation (CWIS) in the region.

Through innovative solutions grounded in local contexts, these countries are galvanizing collaborative action across the region, with cities and municipalities forming the unit of change. These solutions have immense potential as learning models which can be scaled and replicated across other emerging economies facing similar challenges in South Asia and beyond.

Sanitation for All
Unique Approaches, Replicable Solutions

Over the past decade, India, Nepal and Bangladesh have made significant strides towards driving CWIS outcomes. Increasingly, actors in these countries realize that access to sanitation services is incomplete unless they are inclusive of the needs of the socially and economically marginalized, including gender minorities. This has led to the emergence of numerous models and best practices in safe sanitation which have improved the quality of life for service providers, while ensuring that vulnerable groups play a larger role in solving the most pressing sanitation issues.

Extensive collaboration with stakeholders across the sanitation value chain including government officials and funders, has enabled the development of innovative solutions to prioritize sanitation worker safety, safe and effective faecal sludge and septage management (FSSM), community engagement models to increase ownership and more.

These best practices have created significant impact in their regions, with immense potential to be adapted to other contexts and leveraged at scale in similarly situated geographies.
Bangladesh has substantially impacted sanitation outcomes and effectively eliminated open defecation through infrastructure development and policy action. However, a ‘second-generation’ challenge has emerged: the maintenance of existing toilets and safe treatment and management of faecal waste. Sanitation workers play a crucial role in addressing this challenge, as providers of essential services.

While sanitation workers were already providing these services and running micro-enterprises in the country, the sector was disorganized and informal, exposing workers to ill-treatment, poor working conditions and hazards to health and safety. Additionally, workers were not in a position to leverage financial and social security.

Recognizing the need to address this issue, Bangladesh has taken significant steps to ensure the formalization of sanitation work. Between 2014 and 2022, 55+ cooperatives across 13 towns and cities were formed, having a membership of 2,300 women and men. Practical Action, the Secretariat to FSM Network supported with the implementation and institutionalization of this transformational cooperative model, whose key components include vision building, organization development, capacity building, health and safety measures, business start-up support and networking.

Despite delivering crucial services in cities, sanitation workers are often undervalued and given inadequate support to have safe and dignified livelihoods. This is exacerbated by the informal nature of the sector, leading to forced manual scavenging, social stigmatization and weakened bargaining power. India and Bangladesh have made significant strides towards solving for these issues and ensuring sanitation worker safety and dignity. With proven impact on communities, the countries are paving the way to create models for the wellbeing of sanitation workers.
Once implemented, the model had significant impact:

- The number of working days lost due to ill-health has reduced by 73% after cooperatives negotiated for access to discounted health services for members.

- Female cooperative members now access and use gender-inclusive and ergonomic mechanical equipment to ensure suitability for female workers.

Due to the success of the cooperative model, it has been independently replicated in 10 cities and is part of the Bangladesh government’s City-Wide Inclusive Sanitation capacity building training.

Click to find out how this model was implemented!

India 🇮🇳

Sanitation has been a key focus area of development in India. With sustained political will towards improving the sector, urban India was declared open-defecation free in October 2019, and is on its path to sustain its ODF status and incrementally shift its focus towards becoming ODF++. This would not have been possible without the efforts of approximately 5 million sanitation workers engaged in 9 different categories of work across the sanitation value chain.

Acknowledging the importance of formalizing service delivery to improve the working conditions, socio-economic status, and health and safety measures for sanitation workers, the GARIMA scheme was launched in Odisha, India, with implementation support from NFSSM Alliance members. The scheme recognizes sanitation workers as professionals, and focuses on the visibilization of sanitation workers to ensure that ‘no one is left behind’ through the first comprehensive digital database of sanitation workers providing services in urban areas. The scheme stipulates holistic measures to ensure dignified livelihoods for sanitation workers and benefits for their families. Key provisions include:

- Establishment of rest houses known as Garima Grihas for workers to bathe, change and rest to ensure dignity of labour and improve social acceptance of workers.

- State-of-the-art safety gear, devices and PPE kits, as well as the establishment of Emergency Response Sanitation Units (ERSUs) in every Urban Local Body (ULB) to institutionalize safe working conditions and protection for sanitation workers.

- Periodic capacity building to enhance skills, update knowledge on evolving technology, safe operation of equipment and machinery etc.

- Access to financial entitlements including assured minimum wages, risk and hardship allowance, disability support, health and life insurance, education grants for children of sanitation workers to break the intergenerational cycle of caste-based work

The GARIMA scheme has positively impacted 11,000+ sanitation workers in Odisha.

Read more about the GARIMA scheme here.
Safely Managed Waste through a People-First Approach

Access to toilets is the first crucial step towards ensuring inclusive sanitation for all. However, it is essential to move beyond access, and towards the safe and sustainable treatment of human waste. In order to make this an inclusive and sustainable practice, community ownership and engagement is essential, particularly within underserved groups.

Nepal

Although Nepal was declared Open Defecation Free (ODF) in 2019, it has faced challenges in maintaining this status. Since 11% of homes are connected to sewer lines, with most of the population relying on on-site sanitation systems, there has been an increasing focus on prioritizing safe treatment and disposal of faecal waste.

Recognizing the crucial need to strengthen existing infrastructure and build enhanced facilities providing integrated and inclusive sanitation services for the people of Nepal, the country has developed innovative solutions at the city and state level. In the municipality of Waling, the municipal leadership identified the gaps in the value chain due to which untreated faecal waste was being dumped into the environment, threatening the health of the public as well as surrounding ecosystems.

To address these issues, the municipality took a multipronged approach. Mechanical desludging services were initiated to supplement existing private service providers, with the aim of encouraging the practice of frequent scheduled desludging in the municipality.

Additionally, as a result of extensive research and planning, a state-of-the-art Faecal Sludge Treatment Plant (FSTP) was set up in Waling, Nepal, as a Municipal Sanitation Centre to resolve the issue. However, the FSTP was envisioned to not only serve the purpose of treating human waste but also contributing meaningfully to the local community by providing a space for picnics and recreation.

The FSTP has since emerged not only as a popular recreation spot for the public, but also as a learning hub for surrounding municipalities. The success of the FSTP and its acceptance by the public can be attributed to its approach which foregrounds the impact on communities.

Read more about the Municipal Sanitation Centre here
The NFSSM Alliance, CWIS Alliance Nepal and FSM Network came together at FSM-7 to share collective learnings and best practices from India, Nepal and Bangladesh. Catch a glimpse of the insights from the sessions:

**Collaborative action** has played a catalyzing role in accelerating the region’s sanitation journey. The **system change approach** adopted by the collaboratives has created a strengthened ecosystem and enabling environment for inclusive sanitation, with multiple **diverse stakeholders converging with their unique expertise** to work towards common goals.

Sanitation outcomes across South Asia have been positively impacted by components of CWIS. These include **capacity building** of government officials and service providers, **engagement with the private sector**, the **strengthening of municipal finances**, **monitoring** and **evaluation** and a **data-driven approach** to support implementation and policy decisions.

**Did you know?**
Countries in the Global South, including South Asian nations, are disproportionately affected by climate change. **Click** to find out how sanitation and climate are interlinked!
Leveraging The Power Of Knowledge To Scale Inclusive Sanitation Outcomes

The NFSSM Alliance curates knowledge products codifying inclusive sanitation best practices, tools and techniques to build the capacities of stakeholders to enable cross-learning and replication of outcomes in the sector.

Visit our [website](#) to view all our knowledge products, or write to us at [secretariat@dasra.org](mailto:secretariat@dasra.org) for access to specific ones.

**Municipal Strengthening for Improved Urban Services**

The report highlights the need for strong municipal governance, with a focus on the delivery of essential services such as sanitation and water supply in urban India. The report articulates gaps and challenges that impede the delivery of quality services in cities and towns and identifies a comprehensive list of actionable recommendations to enable municipal strengthening at the national, state and local government levels, to ensure last mile delivery to vulnerable communities.

**Co-treatment Manual**

A practical, step-by-step workbook style booklet for practitioners. The manual highlights the benefits of co-treatment of faecal sludge at STPs in bridging critical gaps within faecal sludge treatment infrastructure in urban areas.

**Best Practices on Sanitation Worker Safety from Indian cities**

The case study report details the leading best practices needed for solving the complex and intersectional issues which impede the lives of sanitation workers. It covers schemes and interventions that focus on solving issues such as the invisibilization of sanitation workers; lack of access to safe work environments; non-availability of benefits and access to finances.

**The Science, Art and Craft of SBCC**

This Primer is an essential document which incorporates field-based learnings and evidence towards enabling behaviour change for safe and inclusive sanitation outcomes. The SBCC Primer aids the on-ground implementation of behavior change campaigns and can be leveraged effectively across diverse geographies.