Fostering robust local data ecosystems for sustainable sanitation service delivery in cities of South Asia

Part of the South Asia Dialogue Series on SDG 6 Universal Access to Water and Sanitation by 2030

Summary of Insights

Premise:

Local governments across South Asia are developing city-level infrastructure to enable safely managed sanitation. As service levels increase, their sustainability would depend on reliable and efficient operation of supporting systems. But how data-empowered are local governments to diagnose and solve performance challenges? The present webinar sought to answer the question by bringing together partners from government, non-profits, and developmental agencies for a vibrant deliberation.

Challenges:

- **Data on urban basic services is weak, with national censuses often still being the most commonly used source for planning.**

- **National MIS have not succeeded in incentivizing a culture of data use.** National Management Information System (MIS) are not tied to a clea accountability frame- work or use case at the local level.

- **Quality and sustainability of local service data systems is directly related to the usefulness of these systems to local service providers and the ease of setting up and maintaining these systems.[1]**

> *"Across South Asian countries, data flow is unidirectional in nature and cities largely remain data producers instead of data consumers"*
>
> **Kun Zhang,**
> Athena Infonomics

Ongoing Initiatives:

A few ongoing initiatives in the South Asia Region that attempt to address sanitation data gaps include:

- **SCIFI City Platform and FSM platform; Odisha, India:** The SCIFI City Platform is a web- based system that allows users to store, visualize, and analyze spatial data using open-source softwares at the backend. The Platform enables spatially-informed sanitation planning by bringing together diverse datasets related to administrative units, groundwater and surface water, urban and rural sanitation infrastructure, connectivity, and demography. The FSM

1 Here is a document which provides guidance in helping cities assess their existing sanitation data and identify gaps in these datasets and suggest potential directions a city could consider strengthening its sanitation data ecosystem.

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Platform, developed as part of eGovernments Foundation's Digit offering, targets day-to-day operational management of FSM systems. It tracks data seamlessly across the sanitation service chain – from the time citizens request desludging services to the disposal of faecal sludge at the treatment plant and its treatment. It is designed to enable local governments to generate insights on asset utilization, revenue generation, and service timeliness and quality.

- **Integrated Municipal Information Systems (IMIS); Selected cities in Bangladesh:** IMIS is a web GIS-based information system which enables information-based decision making and planning for municipal services. Highlighting the use case of IMIS, Mr. Azmal Hossain, Secretary of Jessore Municipality, Bangladesh explained how the IMIS linked dashboard is used by the local desludging operator for digitally processing emptying service delivery - upon customer request, IMIS is used to create an application ID and specify emptying and disposal modalities.

- **Sanboard; Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE), Government of Bangladesh:** Currently, Sanboard hosts sanitation situation data for 53 district towns and 8 city corporations in the country. DPHE is looking at integrating sanitation data from additional 329 towns in Sanboard. This will help establish the baseline sanitation situation across towns in the country. DPHE further plans on integrating the IMIS for digitisation of services and improving service delivery quality.

- **N-WASH portal; Ministry of Water Supply, Government of Nepal:** N-WASH is an online portal which collects data from the municipalities at the national level and develops WASH plans which are further used by the Ministry for investment planning and allocation of funds. Out of 753 municipalities of Nepal, 300 municipalities are currently using the portal to develop municipal-level WASH plans. The Ministry is working to strengthen the system to go beyond municipal government level planning to also include planning at the provincial level.

Reflections from Panel:

A few high-level takeaways from the panel discussion are summarized below.

- **Building capacity of municipal officials to sustain national initiatives** – Addressing the issue of sustainability, Ms. Sharmistha Debnath, Executive Engineer, DPHE, Bangladesh and Ms. Sudha Shrestha, WASH National Professional Officer from UN-HABITAT supporting the N-WASH program, mentioned that the capacity of the municipal water supply department is currently not up to mark and massive capacity building initiatives are needed to shift to digital systems and sustain the dashboard initiatives. Similarly, in Nepal, municipalities have no separate unit for water and sanitation. While for Nepal, it was suggested that a separate

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unit be carved out, in Bangladesh, DPHE plans on engaging their local staff, various development partners and training institutes to build capacity of local municipal officials who can report on data and utilise data for delivering improved services.

- **Digitalisation as an approach to sustain initiatives at the local and national level** – Na Won Kim from Asian Development Bank, mentioned that sustainability of infrastructure and services is a major focus area for the bank, thus taking a long-term approach towards building systems. This long-term approach led to a focus on digitalisation and how that can be used to ensure sustainability of infrastructure. ADB is using grant money and project loans as incentives, along with persuading and demonstrating to governments how digitalisation can aid in efficient and sustainable service delivery. She also stressed that with advancing ICT, there are a lot of different platforms in place and care must be taken regarding what to use, how to use, and how sustainability of the system can be ensured to benefit users.

- **Digital systems should account for local mediations and claim-making between groups of citizens and government for reduced last-mile barriers to services** – Sarayu Natarajan of Aapti Institute mentioned that often, last-mile governance problems are solved by groups of citizens through intermediation using private channels to communicate with local leadership/bureaucrats. As a result, there is a certain capture of citizen voice in decision-making and framing of accountability in delivering services to the community.

"Three pillars are critical to strengthen local data ecosystems — systems (basic hardware and integration with other data systems), people (building capacity, monitoring and evaluation, governance) and processes (operational strategies evolving with sanitation landscape)"

Neha Agarwal,
Centre for Policy Research

While there were several interesting points raised and discussed during the webinar, the above summary captures only a portion of it. To watch the full webinar, you can access the recording from here. More information about the webinar and presentation slides can be accessed here.

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