



## **Demand driven approach of DASCOW in Bangladesh**

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THE WATSAN PARTNERSHIP Project, initiated by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, started in February 1998 in the north-western part of Bangladesh. A partnership of three international NGOs supports 15 local partner NGOs to implement the project. The overall objectives of this project are

- to improve user's sustainable access and use of affordable water and sanitation facilities in the project area, especially in low water table and arsenic affected areas, in a sustainable community based manner,
- to build on the experience gathered in the project towards an incremental integration into the nation wide Arsenic Mitigation and Water Supply Project of World Bank-SDC-Government of Bangladesh.

The Development Association for Self-reliance Communication and Health (DASCOW) is one of the three international NGOs, together with CARE-Bangladesh and IDE (International Development Enterprises) of this action research project. DASCOW focuses on community management. It defines community management as the capacity that enables the communities to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their development activities according to their needs. The process requires mobilizing resources within the community and is based on the community's own strengths. The entire process is centered on self-management at the community level and a sense of ownership of the activities.

This paper will tell a story of how a community can manage the water and sanitation related problems through their community self-help organization called Village Development Committee (VDC).

### **The story told by Mr. Mizanur Rahman, the chairman of Pilla para VDC**

"The name of our village is Pilla para, which is situated in the Paba thana of Rajshahi district. We have a Village Development Committee (VDC) in our village. In fact, under WATSAN partnership project, with the help of DASCOW, BIKASH (*local NGO, ed.*) facilitated the community people to be united through an institution called VDC. Initially we could not understand the need for an organization. Later, after knowing the benefits of creating an institution, we the villagers decided to form VDC. In order to form VDC, an organizing committee was created during December 1998. After two months,

this VDC was formed and started its work. We create this for our development and now we feel that this VDC is necessary for us. It is necessary for our overall development as well as for solving many other problems related to water. If we give one example, you will understand why VDC is necessary for us.

Before liberation, there were little development activities. In that time, only two tube-wells were in our village. The need for water of villagers was not filled-up by that. They collected water from far. Again, some of them used river and pond water for all purposes though it was harmful for health. Meanwhile diarrhea, cholera, cold, and jaundice caused by water always occurred here. The economical condition of villagers was poor and they became poorer after that. As there was little source of pure water in the village, rich man and general villagers made a dug-well by their own initiative. The land for the dug-well was donated by the property owner.

Most of the villagers and neighbors used this water for all purposes. Villagers used the water twenty five to thirty years and after that, the dug-well became inactive. This time government, different NGOs and villagers took the initiative for tube-well installment. The number of tube wells increased as per need of our people. We heard that tube well water is safe for health. But now tube well water is not safe because some tube wells are affected by arsenic.

We, the VDC of Pilla para, got the message about arsenic and its seriousness in a monthly meeting organized by an NGO named BIKASH. We were also informed



**Figure 1. The third person from left is Mr. Mizanur Rahman the Chairman of VDC, who told the story**

that arsenic is not so much present in river, canal, well, dug-well, pond water etc., because it is surface level water. After knowing all this, the tube wells were tested by the expert and initiatives came from the villagers. They found arsenic in two tube-wells which were functioning well. Here it needs to be mentioned that though in our village there are 52 tube wells, only two are functioning, three are out of order and the rest 47 do not function in dry season due to unavailability of water. This problem was discussed in the monthly meeting of VDC and we decided that we would take initiatives to renovate two dug-wells in the village. After we discussed it with all villagers we decided that we would seek permission from the owners. In this way, it could be possible to get safe water for the villagers. We went to BIKASH and asked for their help, for example to motivate people to work, and to help to seek permission from landowner.

After taking permission from landowner, we started the renovation work of that dug-well during mid of May of this year. We did not face any problem on the first day. However, on the second day, the son of the owner created obstacle to do the work, because he thought that his father's land would go away to others. He threatened the laborers and stopped the digging work. In the mean time, another person reached there. He claimed that he was the real owner of that land and that he bought 14 months ago. He also mentioned that he had evidence of buying the land. He said that he had no objection regarding the renovation of the dug well as villagers would benefit from this. However, the disputes regarding land ownership created a great problem for villagers. We then raised question about the real ownership of this land and informed this matter to the chairman of the union parishad (*local government body, ed.*) and its members. The Chairman agreed to sit with us the same day.

Both parties participated in that meeting and expected the ideal solution. But it was not solved. The son of the owner thought he should report this land dispute matter to the local police office. As the matter had gone in the

hands of police, we felt we had to sit with the police to get the permission for digging.

The people from BIKASH helped us to meet with the police. They requested the police to discuss with VDC and general villagers about this matter. About 40 villagers were present in the meeting. The responsible police persons then talked with the villagers and VDC members about dug-well renovation. We told the police that in our area, water is contaminated with arsenic. We are facing the problems of getting safe water. If we dig the dug well, many people would benefit from it. At last, the villagers could convince the local police officer of the need for starting the work on the dug-well. The police ordered to start digging the dug-well and told that the conflict regarding land ownership would be resolved by the Chairman of Union Parishad (UP). The VDC then contacted the local leaders and civil administrative persons including the chairman of the UP. In addition, the community people protested unanimously and informed that to get safe water, already the community people invested their own money for the renovation of this dug well. Now it is the community property and every one of this community has the right to use this water. Finding the huge popular response for digging this dug well, the members of the Union Parishad, chairman, and the policeman understood the villagers' need. They understood that as community, people would get benefit from this dug-well and it could be considered as community property. The crisis regarding land is not yet solved but the person who demanded the land has given verbal support to use the dug-well for the use of villagers."

The story shows that the key ideas behind community management, as outlined at the start of this paper, are successful in the Watsan Partnership Project.

### Institutional framework

"A VDC is the institutional framework for individuals or households of a villages who have agreed to cooperate on a continuing basis in order to pursue their objectives" (DASCOH, 2000, p.42).



**Figure 2. The villagers of Pilla para fought for the renovation of this dug-well**



**Figure 3. A monthly meeting of a VDC**

In Pilla para, the VDC members had a shared interest in securing safe water and cooperate to present and defend their needs. A VDC is also a membership organisation in which the members share risks as well as costs, and are accountable to each other. In Pilla para the decision and preparation for renovation of the dug well was taken jointly by the villagers, not only by the leader. The villagers were present while the members of the VDC met with the police and local government body. All decisions were taken in a participatory way.

A VDC is a village level organization. People from all strata come in this VDC. The story revealed that the VDC had organizational strength. Organization helps people to be a self-reliant and fight against obstacles. Due to organizational strength, the community people of Pilla para could fight against the land dispute and could solve their water-related problems.

### **Local partner NGOs**

“Local Partner NGOs are charged with the task of community management promotion. To achieve this goal they utilise a series of promotional tools as part of the community management promotion process. This process becomes self-reliant when the VDC itself takes on the role of promoting community management.” (DASCOH 2000, p.42)

In the story BIKASH, as the local partner NGO helped develop the capacity of the villagers. All the time the community people identify their problems and try to solve them by taking initiatives.

### **Self-reliance**

“Community management is a means to achieve self-reliance whereby people are no longer dependent on the benevolence or assistance of third parties to secure individual or common interests. Through community management the VDC has the analytical, productive and organisational capacity to design and implement strategies that contribute to the improvement of the life of its members and the maintenance of its independent status.” (DASCOH 2000, p.42)

The story tells us how the VDC could mobilize both the human and other resources. The villagers provided labor and other cost. The VDC did not ask for money from the NGO for digging the dug-well. The villagers themselves managed the entire cost. The story also revealed that a sense of ownership was created among people by the establishment of an institution at their village level. Due to that, the VDC of Pilla para started digging the dug-well by their own initiative and resources. While talking with the members of the VDC, they informed that at any cost they would maintain and use this water because this dug well is their only source of safe water. They felt that it was their duty to preserve it because at present, villagers depended on it for getting safe water.

In Bangladesh, until today, the concept of VDCs is unfamiliar. There are no formal village governance bodies. The government of Bangladesh is gradually introducing decentralised governance. It has so far reached the union level with elected committees. It is hoped that the practice with VDCs will build skills and capacity in villages for the moment when elected governance will be established at village level.

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