

**Improving the lives of the urban poor**  
**Case studies on the provision of basic services through**  
**partnerships**



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# I. Introduction

## A. Urban poverty and local interventions

Poverty in Asia-Pacific is still predominantly rural but rapid urbanization may change this picture in the coming years. The United Nations estimates that by 2025 the majority of the population in the region will be urban and unless this urbanization process is well managed, an increasing proportion of the population (eventually the majority of the population) in cities and towns will be poor. In the coming decades, national policies and local initiatives to improve living conditions in cities will, therefore, become more and more relevant for reducing poverty in Asia and the Pacific.

Extreme income poverty (as measured, for example, by the dollar-a-day line) is rare in urban areas, but higher income levels do not always translate into better living standards. Because in the urban economy most goods and services are traded and paid for in cash, residents in cities need a much higher income than rural residents. Basic services are more frequently available in cities and towns, but the urban poor can face legal and financial barriers to access them. Many people are prevented from using some public services because they are not legally entitled to live where they live. The financial barriers do not refer only to the nominal cost of a service, but to the time lost in accessing them, and the income that is foregone in the process.

Availability of land for housing is another typically urban problem. Because the poor can only afford to live in places that nobody else wants, their houses are typically in areas that have no basic infrastructure, are at risk of flooding or exposed to contamination. Furthermore, many of the urban poor do not have a legal claim to the land where they live and are at constant threat of being evicted. It is estimated that more than 550 million people in this region (excluding China) live under such conditions in areas referred to as slums.

Improving the living conditions of the slum dwellers is a growing challenge for the governments in this region as it often lacks the capacity or the resources to provide the infrastructure and basic services needed in these areas. Capacities need to be built and more resources should be mobilized through both Governments and the private sector. Most importantly, institutional arrangements will need to be changed because the current laws, regulations and business practices do not reflect the conditions and needs of the urban poor.

Many of the required actions will need to be taken at the national level: the poor need macroeconomic conditions that allow them to earn a decent income, or laws and regulations that are suitable to their needs. But many of the conditions that affect the poor are local in nature and can be better addressed through interventions designed at the local level. Local governments play a key role in urban poverty reduction, as they are in the best position to deliver basic services.

Local initiatives, most of them small in scale, are often the most effective measures to improve the living conditions of the poor. Programmes that are designed and implemented at a national level are often imposed from above without consideration for local conditions and needs. On the other hand, interventions designed by local actors can rely on the local knowledge and can be tailored to the specific conditions of the population in the area. Small-scale programmes are also more conducive to participation

by the poor in the design and implementation, thereby increasing ownership and helping sustainability.

## **B. Case studies**

Because of its regional focus and extensive regional networks, ESCAP is in an advantageous position for identifying and disseminating effective practices that can increase income or bring basic services to the poor. In this publication, five case studies of local initiatives that improve the delivery of basic services to the urban poor are compiled. Each one of them has innovative and unique features from which lessons can be extracted and, hopefully, applied in other locations.

### **1. Solid Waste Management in Bangladesh**

A local NGO called Waste Concern has organized selected communities in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to set up a system of door-to-door garbage collection and composting. Because 80 per cent of the domestic waste in Dhaka is organic, there is huge potential for transforming it into compost. In this practice, the compost is bought by a fertilizer company that enriches and markets it for organic farming throughout the country. The system has two sources of income: the fees paid by each household for the collection service and the revenues from marketing the compost.

### **2. Community Toilets in Indonesia**

An NGO constructed community toilets in Tangerang, an industrial area close to Jakarta (Indonesia) where migrant workers settled in areas without water and sanitation facilities. The facilities were built with the help of foreign donors but are now sustained by the user fees. The centres sell fresh water by the bucket and provide toilets and bathroom services. The facilities are managed like private businesses, by a selected family from each community.

### **3. Water for Poor Communities in the Philippines**

The Water for the Poor Communities initiative came out of the privatization of the water supply system in Manila (Philippines). Manila Water Company Inc. (MWCI), the company that won the concession for maintenance and expansion of the system in the East Zone of Manila, realized that the standard service was not accessible to the slum dwellers in the area. To solve this problem, the company partnered with communities and designed water distribution systems adapted to the needs of each community. To address the difficulties in providing individual connections to households that have no legal title and are often physically difficult to reach, the company provided the water in bulk to the community, which in turn distributed it among the households. Although most inhabitants of these communities still lack individual connections, the system has improved their access to water and has reduced the losses due to non-revenue water for the company.

### **4. Water Distribution in Colombo**

In Colombo, Sri Lanka, a different approach to the privatization of water was implemented, affecting a community of 556 households. Under a project sponsored by UNESCAP, a small construction company obtained a concession to provide water through individual connections in a slum. The company constructed the pipes inside the slum, installed individual meters for each household and collects the bills monthly. The company buys the water in bulk from the state-owned utility. Households in the area previously relied on 8 public stand posts to collect their water and were willing to pay for

the individual connections. A careful partnership between the community, the private company and the water utility was designed to run the system.

## 5. Community Contracts System

The last case describes a generic methodology for getting communities involved in the construction of infrastructure of their concern. Under the Community Contract System developed in Sri Lanka, communities act as promoters, engineers and contractors, as well as end users. Besides being a procurement mechanism, it is an empowering tool for the urban poor. This system has been implemented for the past twenty years by the National Housing Development Authority and by other agencies for the construction of toilet blocks, water stand posts, community centres and other amenities.

### C. Partnerships that work for the poor

The five initiatives presented in this publication were all designed as local interventions, although some have been replicated on a wider scale and the Community Contract System has become a national programme. Besides this, there are other common characteristics worth highlighting:

**They are partnerships between different institutions.** Central and local governments are increasingly realizing their shortcomings in providing services and infrastructure that the growing urban population demands. Without diminishing their responsibilities, partnerships between the government and the private sector or civil society are increasingly popular. These partnerships have the advantage of bringing the strengths and capacities of different institutions, and of allocating rewards and risks in an efficient way. The examples presented in this volume are partnerships between governments and private companies that also include communities, NGOs and/or the informal sector.

**Poor people are part of the partnership.** Community organizations have been involved in the design and implementation of the practices. In some cases, the practice relied on existing community organizations; in others, such organizations had to be established before starting the operations. Participation by people who benefit from the intervention improves efficiency and sustainability. If slum dwellers feel ownership of the water distribution system, they will more likely pay their fees. Equally important, such interventions will act as empowering mechanisms for the community.

**The practice used external assistance, but relies on internal resources for sustainability.** The five cases have benefited from some form of external aid, but this was typically provided as an initial grant to help start the operations. In the Community Toilets practice in Indonesia or the Solid Waste Management practice in Dhaka, foreign

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