



# Reframing the urban sanitation narrative

## Stories of leadership and change in Bangladesh



## SNV NETHERLANDS DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION

SNV is a not-for-profit international development organisation that makes a lasting difference in the lives of people living in poverty by helping them raise incomes and access basic services. We focus on three sectors and have a long-term, local presence in over 25 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Our team of more than 1,300 staff is the backbone of SNV.

This storybook compiles inspirational stories of entrepreneurship, leadership and sanitation service delivery in the cities of Khulna, Jhenaidah and Kushtia in Bangladesh. It is produced as part of SNV's Urban Sanitation and Hygiene for Health and Development (USHHD) product, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation project, Citywide Inclusive Sanitation Engagement (CWISE).

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# Reframing Bangladesh's urban sanitation narrative

SNV has been an active and long-time urban sanitation partner of the Government of Bangladesh since 2014.

This collaboration started through the Bill & Melinda Gates-funded project, 'Demonstration of pro-poor market-based solutions for faecal sludge management in urban centres of southern Bangladesh,' which was implemented in Khulna city and the towns of Jhenaidah and Kushtia.

Together with local stakeholders and authorities – Khulna Water Supply and Sewerage Authority, Khulna University, and Khulna University of Engineering and Technology – the project increased access to environmentally safe sanitation facilities for 250,000 people.

Indirectly, this success contributed to improvements in the environmental conditions of more than a million people.



These gains were achieved through:

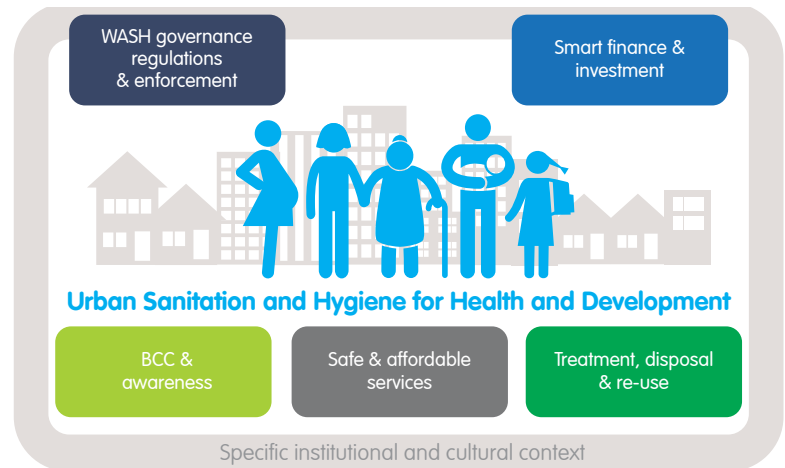
- implementation of tailor-made activities to address **behaviour change** and **sanitation demand**;
- design and introduction of **occupational health and safety standards** in collaboration with employers;
- enhancement of **sanitation re-use designs** informed by research on re-use by the agriculture, fisheries and floriculture sectors;
- development of a **GIS-based integrated information system** to professionalise faecal sludge management (FSM) and planning; and
- construction of **treatment plants and upgrade of slum sanitation facilities**.

The SNV project, Citywide Inclusive Sanitation Engagement (CWISE) in Bangladesh builds on the success of the earlier project.

Also funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, CWISE is a three-year project being implemented with the Khulna City Corporation, the Jhenaidah and Kushtia Paurashava, and in coordination with the national FSM Network.

With the Government of Bangladesh, SNV and its wide-ranging local partners are co-creating sanitation model cities all over the country.

CWISE applies SNV's Urban Sanitation and Hygiene for Health and Development (USHHD) approach, which is in pursuit of institutionalising financially viable and safely managed urban sanitation services.



# Transforming gender roles, one woman leader at a time

Rokeya Rahman is from Khulna. Six years after joining a Community Development Committee (CDC)<sup>1</sup> in 2008, she was elected President and Chair of the CDC Federation – the apex body of 30 CDC clusters in Khulna. Through the CDCs, women gain spaces for their active participation within the community, as members or leaders within the sanitation sector.



Rokeya was a born leader. As a member of her community, she participated in many social causes. But the community was not always open to women playing an active role in public spaces. Whenever she returned late at home, she'd often receive disapproving glances from her neighbours and relatives.

Though there were moments that Rokeya considered leaving work, she knew that she must persevere. Rokeya's perseverance paid off. In

2008, she became a CDC cashier in Khulna. In 2014 she became the federation's President and Chair-elect.

In addition to her federation<sup>2</sup> responsibilities, Rokeya also manages a vacutug emptying service. Her services cover a third of all wards in Khulna, with a combined population of 300,000 people. The cluster acquired the vacutug through the UNDP's National Urban Poverty Reduction

<sup>1</sup> The CDCs are governance structures at grassroots level, which were created initially to implement the NUPRP project (formerly LPUPAP and UPPR) and mobilise community participation. Each CDC represents around 20 households.

Programme during the initial stages of cluster formation.

Managing the cluster's emptying services was not without challenges for Rokeya. Some community members could not accept that a woman was running the service. Rokeya was derogatorily called a 'sweeper-leader.' On occasion, when Rokeya picked up the phone to respond to service requests, some prospective clients hung up on her. Managing the men in her business was also challenging, especially during night shifts when she was unable to monitor the quality of their services. As a result, evening services were stopped.

Although far from being a favourable working environment, Rokeya persisted. Today, CDC emptying services is gaining traction. There is also greater



recognition of the leadership role that women can play in the quality delivery of services. Lastly, more and more women customers are finding comfort in articulating their service requests to a woman leader and service provider.

*'Success is not solely dependent on the growth*

*of a business. A successful business must keep in mind the needs of the poor and marginalised in the community. I believe I can take this further with the help of organisations like SNV and local government institutions.'* - Rokeya Rahman

<sup>2</sup> In total, the federation has a membership of 278 CDCs, organised in clusters for each ward. The federation oversees CDC activities, such as savings and credit group arrangements. It enables members' voices and participation in demanding for and monitoring Local Government Institutions (LGIs) delivery and implementation of pro-poor, quality programmes. Federation members receive training and assistance in establishing partnerships with LGIs and other agencies.

# Jhenaidah mayor: an exemplary champion for change

Saidul Islam Mintu is mayor of the municipality of Jhenaidah. He dreams of a 'Green Jhenaidah, Clean Jhenaidah' and has made sanitation his top priority. As lead custodian of sanitation, he is a proponent of decent work for emptiers. He believes that there is no sanitation progress unless the working and health conditions of sanitation workers are also addressed.



Much progress has been achieved in Jhenaidah since 2014. Today, the town's people have access to a faecal sludge emptying service that is being managed by the local NGO, Aid Foundation. Every month, 35 to 40 households make a request for emptying services. These requests equal an average collection of 200 m<sup>3</sup> faecal sludge per month.

Amidst this progress however, the working conditions of sanitation workers have only improved slightly. Emptiers continue to face a great deal of stigma; not only from

their customers, but also from their own family members.

Saidul Islam is committed to changing this. Over the years, he has been working with SNV to provide the community a sustainable sanitation solution.

Part of this collaboration is a joint exploration of ways on how to keep the emptying workforce strong and healthy. Not only because they are instrumental in keeping the environment clean and free from the spread of bacteria, but because



sanitation workers have human rights that must be upheld.

So far, strategies employed by Saidul Islam to reduce stigma against emptiers include:

- challenging caste-based discrimination by hiring emptiers from different castes;
- formalising the work of emptiers by adding them in the payroll of the Paurashava; and
- formally recognising the invaluable work emptiers do, thereby helping raise their social status in their community.

*The mayor's exposure to diverse urban sanitation initiatives has also broadened his vision on other aspects of waste management.*

He now has an ambition to take Jhenaidah forward as a model town for urban sanitation.

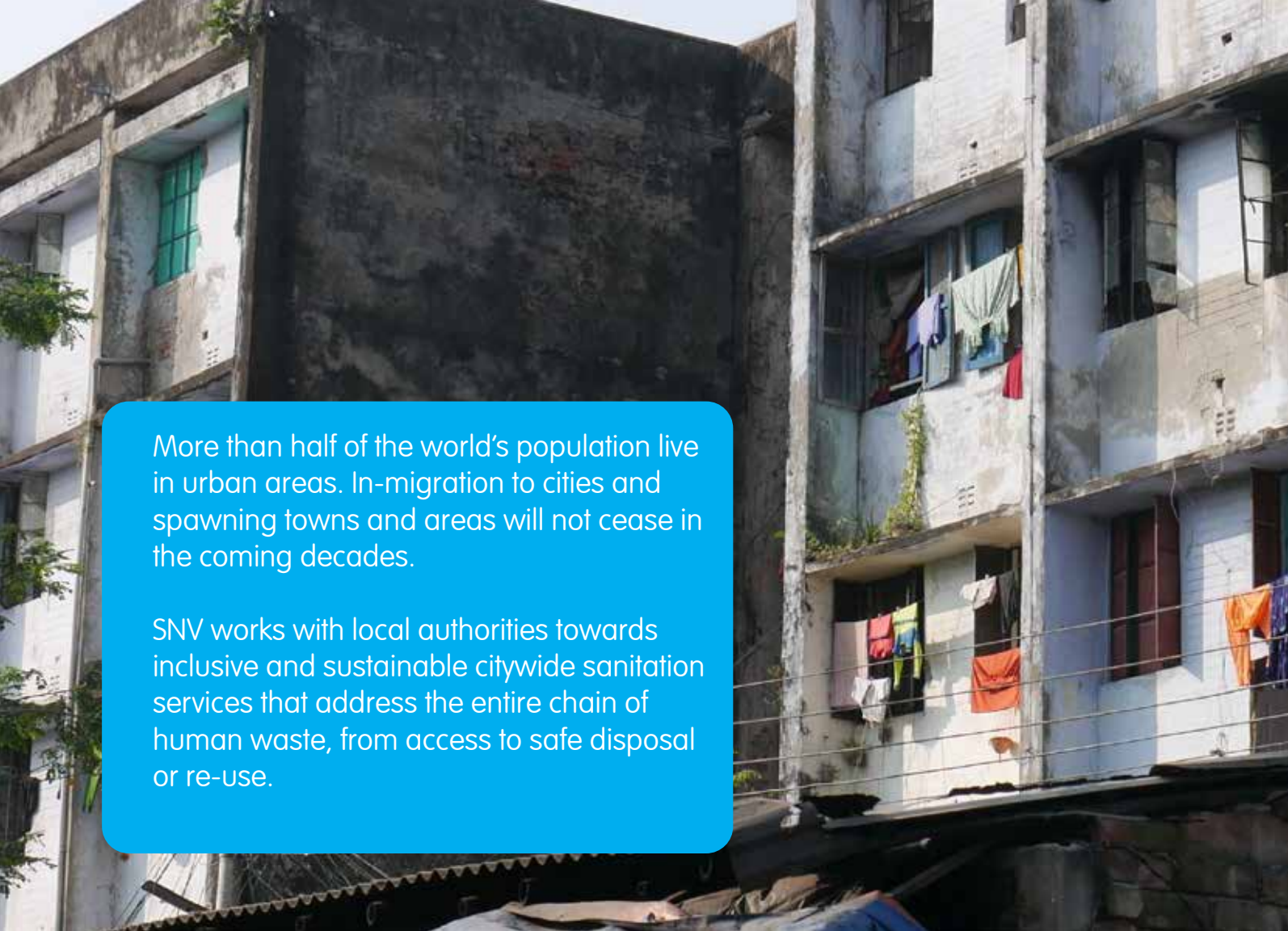
Learning from the success of other towns and acquainting himself with the various waste management technologies around, Saidul Islam believes that mechanical emptying could help curb stigma against emptiers.

Mechanical emptying through vacutugs significantly reduces emptiers' contact with human waste and facilitates a more dignified,

healthier and safer process of carrying out their sanitation tasks. Vacutugs enhance job satisfaction and reduce environmental pollution.

The mayor believes that Jhenaidah is making great progress in the shift to mechanical emptying. He said, 'The community has been very supportive of our work. We hope they have already seen the benefits of mechanical and regular emptying. It makes me very happy to know that my dream of a "Green Jhenaidah, Clean Jhenaidah" is coming true.'



A photograph of a multi-story urban building, likely in a developing country. The building has several floors with balconies. Laundry, including colorful clothes and towels, is hanging from the balconies. The building's facade is weathered and shows signs of age. The sky is clear and blue. A blue text box is overlaid on the left side of the image.

More than half of the world's population live in urban areas. In-migration to cities and spawning towns and areas will not cease in the coming decades.

SNV works with local authorities towards inclusive and sustainable citywide sanitation services that address the entire chain of human waste, from access to safe disposal or re-use.



**URBAN SANITATION  
is a GLOBAL PRIORITY**

# Local NGO aids in professionalising FSM services

AID Foundation (foundation) is a not-for-profit organisation founded in Bangladesh in 1992. As part of its mission to improve the economic and health status of potentially disadvantaged communities in Jhenaidah, it considers urban sanitation an important development area with emptiers as key partners of an urban sanitation system that benefits all.



Poorly maintained toilets and the lack of safely managed emptying services have detrimental effects to life opportunities of people and the environment. To accelerate efforts to deliver and regulate safe sanitation services – specifically, the onsite management of human waste – the foundation partnered with the Jhenaidah Paurashava, SNV and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to promote viable business models within the sanitation chain: emptying, transport, treatment and re-use of human waste.

To start, the foundation established a WASH committee in its own structure. Each committee member received training on faecal sludge management (FSM). Known for the foundation's outstanding advocacy, trained staff were fast to organise the distribution of tailor-made promotional materials widely.

Emptiers are among the foundation's target audiences. For too long, emptiers have been carrying out manual septic tank cleaning and unhygienic disposal practice. Often under informal

work arrangements and unsafe conditions.

Following Jhenaidah municipality's formal recognition of emptiers' work, positive changes have been taking place. This includes the increased uptake of safe emptying services.

*But formal recognition alone does not lead automatically to decent work. To complement this, the Paurashava, with support from the foundation, increased awareness on and demand for Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) arrangements, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) use, and mechanical emptying services.*

Continuing this momentum of achievements is necessary to meet Bangladesh's SDG 6 commitment. But this journey will not be without its own set of challenges.

- The number of vacutugs are limited.
- Although emptiers are now salaried staff, they don't receive health or life insurance benefits.
- Demand for services can still be increased through regular awareness raising to emphasise the health and environmental benefits of regular emptying.
- Finally, raising the social status of emptiers continues to be an uphill battle. Emptying is not regarded as respectable work. Most people look down on emptiers and treat them

as social outcasts. Perceptions of faecal sludge management as a taboo subject continues to persist.

Amidst these challenges, AID Foundation remains unwavering in its commitment to better sanitation access and services.



# Fertilising our lands, growing our jobs

Shahida Khatoon has been employed at the Kushtia treatment and co-composting plant for four years. Before the plant, life was an everyday struggle. A good day would mean working as a day labourer, often in road construction sites. However, most days, she remained idle; not for lack of trying, but due to limited job opportunities. Not anymore. Shahida's days look very different now.



Every day, at 08:00, Shahida leaves home with a rake and a broom, confident that a job at the plant is waiting for her. She sorts through waste, puts these in composting pits, extracts treated waste that can be used as fertilisers, then sieves, weighs and packages them for agriculture use.

Agriculture contributes to about 20% of Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The crop sub-sector makes over 60% of this GDP. But the agriculture sector has been in crisis. Most of the

country's soil contain low levels of organic matter. Lands are less arable. The rise in numbers of people in cities is putting a great strain on food production and nutrition.

A 2014 survey by Khulna University of Technology and Engineering and the Asian Institute of Technology estimates that about 628,070 mm<sup>3</sup> of faecal sludge is produced every year in Khulna, 99,274 mm<sup>3</sup> in Kushtia, and 57,915 mm<sup>3</sup> in Jhenaidah. During the same year, SNV

research found that at least two-thirds of all households in the three cities practise unsafe treatment and disposal of faecal sludge.

Initial findings of a subsequent SNV action-research study with the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute of the Ministry of Agriculture suggest that treated faecal sludge has high nutrient value and could potentially be used safely for agriculture. Compared to chemical fertiliser, it increases crop productivity and soil nutrient content (rather than depleting them).

*Based on several FS research studies conducted by SNV and its partners, the abandoned Kushtia composting plant was revived; creating jobs for people like Shahida.*

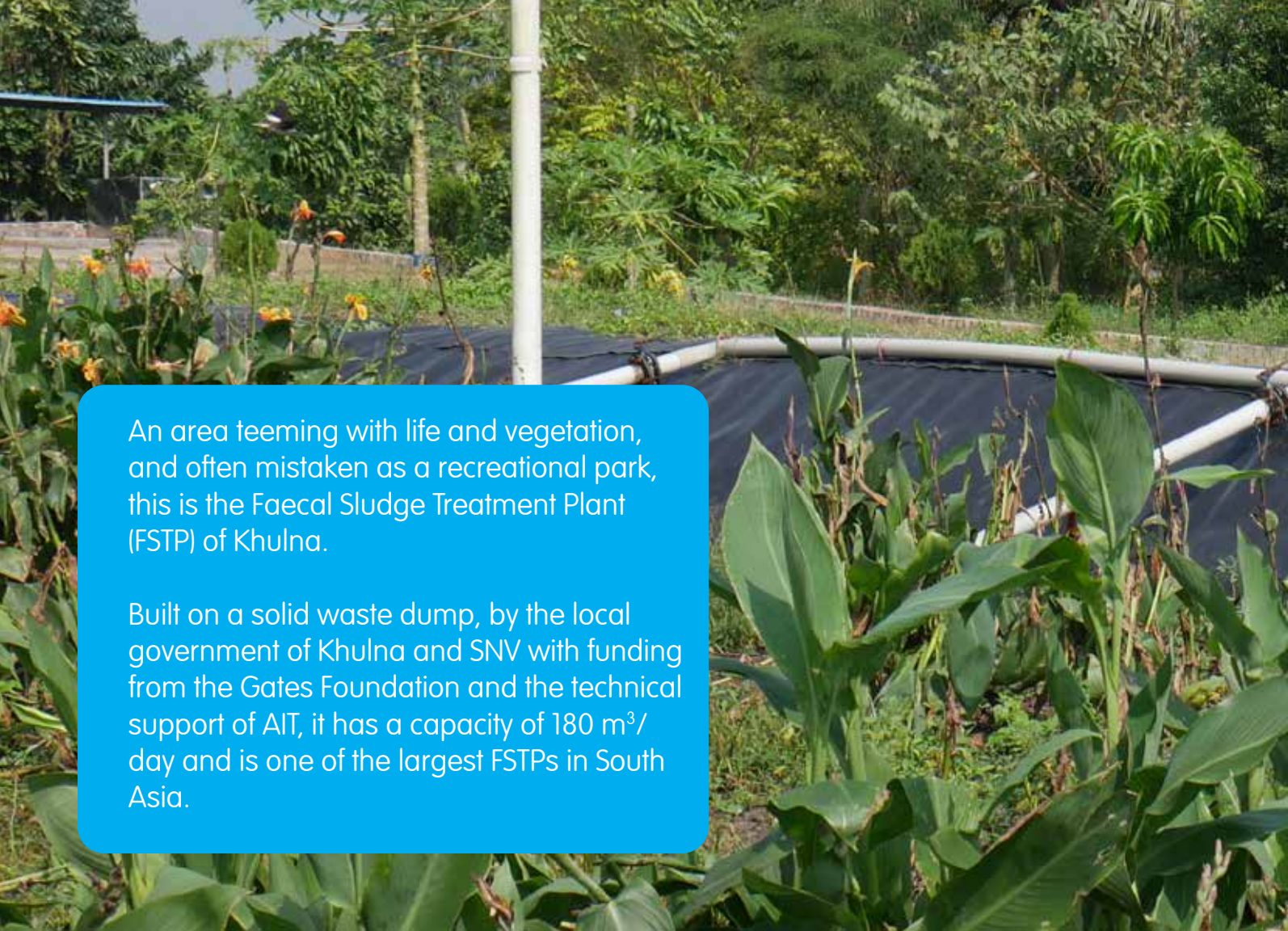
Following a successful recruitment process, Shahida became one of the two women working at the composting plant. Shahida has been working regularly at the plant since then.

She has access to preventative and protective gear, e.g., durable gloves and knee-high boots. She wears a mask to protect herself from toxic fumes. Shahida never removes her gear. She understands the importance of prevention.

Shahida is proud of the work she does and gets along with her colleagues. She is happy the days of worrying about employment are behind her. And, she has gained the respect of her neighbours and friends as an employed woman.

Although higher pay is desired, Shahida is happy to be engaged in a permanent job. She exclaimed: 'I am doing better than most people I know. I will continue working here as long as my body allows me.'





An area teeming with life and vegetation, and often mistaken as a recreational park, this is the Faecal Sludge Treatment Plant (FSTP) of Khulna.

Built on a solid waste dump, by the local government of Khulna and SNV with funding from the Gates Foundation and the technical support of AIT, it has a capacity of 180 m<sup>3</sup>/day and is one of the largest FSTPs in South Asia.





**Co-creating SAFELY MANAGED  
SANITATION infrastructure and plans  
that are resistant to CLIMATE HAZARDS**

# Safety for all: mainstreaming OHS and PPEs

Krishna Das, a mechanical emptier in Jhenaidah, is among the emptiers endorsed by the municipality. After receiving a vacutug, his working and health conditions have improved significantly. Today, Krishna's bare hands are no longer used to empty septic tanks. Sludge is no longer being discharged in nearby channels and drains.



Before engaging with the municipality and SNV's Urban Sanitation and Hygiene for Health and Development (USHHD) activities, Krishna often cycled to his clients' homes. He would carry a bucket and shovel with him everywhere. The journey would often take hours. Back then he offered manual emptying services.

Said Krishna Das, 'My day used to start at 04:00. My work mostly involved cleaning the streets or emptying septic tanks for households. I have always used my bare hands for cleaning.

Everyone around me did the same.'

Similar to his colleagues, he sustained several injuries on the job. He had no access to any type of protective gear. His work was not supported by mechanical devices. Lifting one slab would often require the strength of four to five people. The larger the tank, the heavier the slab. Too often, slabs fell on workers causing injury that may have been prevented. Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) measures in faecal sludge emptying, collection, transport,

disposal, processing, and re-use are key to accident prevention. Mainstreaming OHS is essential. It ensures good working conditions for emptiers and mitigates hazards to their health and the environment. However, many emptiers lacked awareness of the hazards caused by unsafe practices, including the benefits and use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Staff training opportunities used to be limited. Suitable and low-cost gear were seldom offered. Although the transition from manual to mechanical emptying services has been ongoing, there continued to be glaring gaps in standards setting and professionalisation of services.

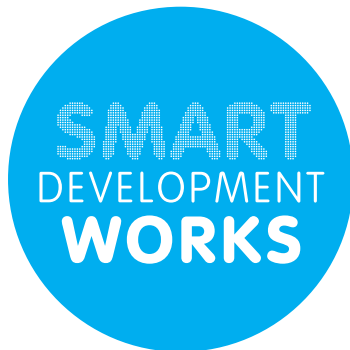
Institutionalising OHS measures across the entire sanitation chain is among the highest priorities of city authorities. Making good on their sanitation promise, the

government – with technical support from SNV – developed an OHS Guideline and a training manual with a PPE section.

Since receiving SNV training on the benefits and use of PPEs and occupational hazard mitigating strategies, emptying-related accidents have been minimised. Manual emptying practice has been on the decline; starting from the city's endorsement of over 400 emptiers and the release of a vacutug. Krishna is very happy that he can now undertake his emptying tasks in safe conditions.

*Krishna is keen to see more FSM improvements. He emphasised the importance of continued emptier education on the benefits of OHS and PPE use. He also stressed the need to strengthen monitoring practice to ensure that appropriate health and safety standards are sustained.*





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