



Strategic sanitation planning – it’s all very well, but . . .

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All photos taken in Bharatpur
by **Ajay Paul**

The Strategic Sanitation Approach offers a conceptual model of sanitation development, but how useful is it in practice? A pilot project in Bharatpur, India has been trying to answer this, and two years after its inception some important lessons have been learned.

Bharatpur in Rajasthan, north India was originally a fort and was built on a low-lying site so that two defensive moats around it would flood during the annual rains. A town gradually built up around the fort, houses were built over drainage lines, and channels which previously carried fresh water into the inner moat became open sewers. Today the town has a population of 200,000 and the polluted inner moat has become a powerful symbol of sanitation problems in the town.

In 1998, GHK Research and Training in partnership with the Water and Sanitation Program-South Asia agreed to help the Municipal Council, Bharatpur (MCB) produce a development plan that

would lead to a cleaner environment and sustainable sanitation services. The project would also serve to test the viability of operationalising the Strategic Sanitation Approach in an ordinary town. An SSA support team has worked with MCB for the last two years.

The planning process

The pilot began with a situation analysis involving stakeholders from government agencies, local NGOs and the community. This was the first step in a collaborative planning process which involved three principal steps:

understand problems – develop solutions – plan city-wide

From the outset it was apparent that three factors would influence the project:

We were not starting with a blank sheet; infrastructure and services already existed, the municipality had funds and there were established procedures for doing municipal business. Sanitation development depended largely on improving these services and that would require a detailed understanding of the municipal working environment. The SSA provided little guidance here as it dealt primarily with the development of new infrastructure.

Planning (let alone strategic planning) was not part of municipal culture, and organising around a written strategy and set of time-bound objectives was an alien approach.

The capacity of the municipality was low and they struggled to deliver any services at all to a reasonable standard – despite reasonable funding and nearly three times the standard number of sanitation staff for a town of this size. The capacity-building needs were substantial.

A Sanitation Development Plan has now been completed and is awaiting formal adoption by the municipality. Its production has been a long and difficult process, but has provided many lessons on the delivery of sanitation services in India, and on the usefulness of the SSA. In the following paragraphs we look at key SSA components, the reality of applying them in an ordinary Indian town, and some of the ways in which obstacles have been tackled.



Municipal sweepers often sweep waste directly into drains

Urban sanitation

Demand-responsive approaches

The adoption of a demand responsive approach was not feasible in Bharatpur. There was a strong sense that services for the poor should be free or heavily subsidised, and cost recovery was not encouraged by the state. The SSA support team therefore focused on incremental improvements by advocating the introduction of hygiene education and latrine promotion into the Low-cost Sanitation Scheme in order to create real demand. This was accepted by MCB and the contractor but the problem remained of finding a suitable agency to deliver the software inputs, and the funding to support them.

Incentives

The Council president and health officer were genuinely concerned to solve the town's acute sanitation problems, but many other officers regarded the project as unofficial and unconnected to their routine work or to government sanitation schemes. However, a strong incentive to act was provided by a Supreme Court judgement on solid waste management. This required a raft of changes in municipal services, some of them advocated earlier by the SSA support team. It prompted MCB to adopt revised staffing arrangements including dedicated teams for solid waste management, drainage and low-cost sanitation.

Inadequate maintenance of the drainage network was a major problem in



Bharatpur and here perverse incentives came into play. Maintenance, like planning, was not part of municipal culture and it was virtually ignored in budgets; even small works had to go to committee for approval. Officials preferred new capital works as the answer to years of neglect. An annual programme of planned maintenance was finally adopted, but staff remained more interested in the new works.

Small steps

The 'small steps' approach was appropriate for Bharatpur because local capacity was limited and the solutions to some problems were not obvious. Piloting in individual city wards enabled lessons to be learned, and systems refined, before expanding new services citywide. This was done, for example, by engaging an NGO

As part of the SSA support project, a local NGO has been helped to set up a private (user-pay) household solid waste collection service

While council officers had found it hard to grapple with questions such as why a service was not functioning efficiently or how to organise the cleaning of the main drains, enthusiasm was regenerated when something practical began, in the form of a drainage survey by external contractors.



Hospital waste lies uncollected in public place



Piling up – (above left) secondary collection of waste from municipal skips is neglected; (above right) the municipal dumpsite is an example of uncontrolled dumping

to establish a primary waste collection service financed by user fees.

The municipality was reluctant to accept the small steps approach. For instance, a modest set of drainage improvements was proposed following a detailed survey by international and local consultants, and the state proved very willing to consider funding such a reasonable and affordable amount. Good planning had improved access to funds, but municipal officials feared that accepting small funds now would preclude other grants later. As the Sanitation Plan neared completion, there were still advocates for a much larger set of new works, including state engineers who were

uncomfortable with what they saw as a partial solution to city drainage problems.

Cities as a whole

The SSA encourages a strategic overview of a town's sanitation needs, but normal practice in Bharatpur was to make ad hoc interventions in an uncoordinated way. This was partly due to the unpredictable nature of government funding; MCB never knew the total resources they would receive in a year and when funds arrived, tended to spend them on immediate problems.

Here the project made a definite impact. A Sanitation Co-ordination Committee was set up with representatives

Municipal collection of street waste



Urban sanitation

from MCB, line departments and two local NGOs and has met regularly for two years. Progress has been slow but productive working relationships have evolved which ensure that community-level initiatives are linked to city planning. The primary waste collection pilot, for example, is managed by an NGO but closely co-ordinated with the municipal secondary service and officers are fully involved in its development. Through the committee, Bharatpur is starting to make better use of its resources by avoiding duplication and improving co-ordination of the various players.

Unbundling technology

The SSA advises against blanket solutions for a whole town; sanitation needs vary from one area to another, and options should be available to suit each circumstance. The Bharatpur pilot, however, suggests that this approach may be over-ambitious. Only one technology was offered through the LCS scheme, and offering more may have overstretched local capacity. The support team therefore suggested improvements to the existing scheme:

The Government of India Low-Cost Sanitation Scheme (LCS)

The LCS scheme aims to eradicate scavenging (daily removal and disposal of faeces from dry latrines) by providing twin-pit pour-flush latrines. In practice, latrines are also provided for households with no latrine at all. In Bharatpur over 4,000 latrines were constructed over more than 10 years, with implementation contracted out to a national NGO.

The scheme was effectively supply-driven with the contractor working through a list of houses 'needing' a sanitary latrine. There was little promotion, a lack of hygiene education and inadequate explanation of operation and maintenance requirements. Despite state rules requiring a user contribution, the latrines were provided free to users apart from the superstructure; even the pits were dug by the contractor.

The design used in Bharatpur had sealed pit walls due to fear of pit collapse in sandy soils, so minimising



the infiltration of waste water into the ground. Many users in any case converted their latrines into quasi-septic tanks without drainage fields or used both pits simultaneously, while some built no superstructure and left the latrine unused. Open defecation remains widespread – especially by children.

Contract management by the municipality was weak, partly because they felt limited ownership of the scheme which is largely state-funded and operates under state rules, though the municipality enter into a contract directly with the implementing NGO.

Following a local review of the scheme, it was agreed to adopt an improved design for the next phase of work, to pay greater attention to supervision and to start in one ward only so that an effective approach could be developed, including a good relationship with the community.

Encroachment in certain areas of the city has taken place over drains, in the process blocking them

Unbundling responsibilities

The SSA advocates decentralised management with potential roles for government agencies, NGOs, the private sector and community organisations in service delivery. In Bharatpur, the practice of contracting out services was already well established but with disappointing results. Services were, if anything, too unbundled, with functions split between several departments and agencies. The challenge was to improve the co-ordination of the various inputs and for this the Sanitation Coordination committee was an ideal vehicle.

“Bharatpur is starting to make better use of its resources by avoiding duplication and improving co-ordination of the various players.”



Many drains are blocked with fecal and solid waste (note latrine effluent from the pipe outlet)

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Commitment to sound finances

It proved extremely difficult to make any changes in the management of municipal finances, which were heavily controlled by the state. There was no separate budget line for sanitation and the state did not encourage cost recovery for the LCS scheme or other sanitation services. However, the urgent need for better sanitation made it impractical to be overly critical of the LCS scheme, which was MCB's principal source of funds for latrine construction.

Wide view of sanitation

Municipal officials were convinced that pollution of the inner moat was the result of a poor drainage system and wanted to concentrate resources there.

It soon became clear that the drainage problem was compounded by inadequate on-site sanitation, which resulted in raw sewage flowing in the drains. This necessitated changes to the low cost sanitation scheme but there was a lack of interest and an entrenched belief that changes were not possible at municipal level.

Conclusions

It is clear that few municipalities would be able to adopt SSA without substantial capacity building or ongoing technical support, and there will be very few towns where this support is available. It is in any case unrealistic to expect municipal officers to make the changes that SSA requires, or to develop new visions of service delivery. Municipalities deal in systems and procedures, not visions and concepts and most have little potential to reinvent themselves. What they need is clear instructions, issued from above, setting out what they must do to improve specific services. New concepts and ideas are certainly needed, but they should be introduced at senior government level and absorbed into official procedures. The implication for sector professionals is that, rather than selling SSA or other concepts, ideas that do not fit easily into the municipal mould, we should focus on understanding the arcane systems under which municipalities operate, and find ways of making them work better. Improvements in the LCS scheme, for example, could have benefits nationwide.