Understanding Management of Community Toilets in Kolkata: Evolvement of Sunehra Sangh

Saurya Sekhar Pal
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B.B. Hall, Sick Line, and Sonai Ward No. 80 Borough IX Kolkata Municipal Corporation

Water For People India 26/1/1 Gariahat Road (South) Kolkata - 700031
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Upholding Human Dignity and Right to an Adequate Standard of Living

The framers of the Constitution of India were aware of the importance of human dignity and worthiness, and therefore they incorporated the words ‘human dignity’ in the preamble of the Constitution of India. The provision of fundamental rights preserves and protects human dignity. The Judiciary has also emphasized dignity as a fundamental right. Fundamental rights are guaranteed by the Constitution to all people without any discrimination. All citizens of India will live and enjoy a peaceful, dignified life without any disturbances.

Poor sanitation leads to denial of rights. Women waste time to fetch water and spend sleepless nights during menstruation worried where to change napkins. Poor wage earners become less productive due to illness, health systems are overwhelmed, and national economies suffer. Without water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), development will not sustain. Inadequate sanitation in India has an annual ecological impact of around 53.8 billion USD (in 2006).

Water For People, in conformity with the Fundamental Rights as laid out in the Constitution of India, envisages and executes various projects to ensure the right to live with human dignity of the people is not neglected and violate. Through water and sanitation initiatives, people are made aware and provided the opportunity to live with dignity. The raised awareness is then sustained through a systematic approach of improved sanitation facilities and strengthened institutions.

The right to an adequate standard of living is enshrined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Fulfillment of the right to an adequate standard of living depends on a number of other economic, social, and cultural rights, including the right to property, the right to work, the right to education, and the right to social security.

The right to adequate standard of living is very often overlooked, especially in remote rural and slums where people are oblivious of the existence of such a right. Water For People aims to erase this ignorance and sustain these rights through community sanitation initiatives undertaken in urban slums of Ward 80 under Kolkata Municipal Corporation. Existing community toilets have been renovated and provided with running water, electricity, wash basins to make them functional and usable day and night. These toilets are in stark contrast to the shacks and semi-pucca houses where the people stay. These toilets are a standard set before the community to refrain from public nuisance and open defecation, but also a separate enclosure to uphold privacy, safety, comfortability, and dignity for menstruating women. Water For People aims at sustaining these renovated community assets through committees, who look after the assets by charging user fees. This document aims at understanding financial management by the community toilet users to address operating costs of the toilets.

1. Background

Water For People India is committed to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities at the household, school, and community level. The Everyone Forever model focuses on comprehensive service provision while ensuring sustainability through community contribution, health and hygiene promotion, setting up operations and maintenance systems, and conforming to government schemes and provisions.

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2 “Article 21 of the Constitution of India guarantees the life and personal liberty to all persons. It guarantees the right of persons to life with human dignity. Therein are included, all the aspects of life which go to make a person’s life meaningful, complete and worth living.” Observation by Supreme Court of India in writ petition (civil) 72 of 1998.
Water For People India undertook initiatives to improve community sanitation in B.B. Hall, Sick Line, and Hooghly Jute Mill areas, under Ward 80 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation, in Kolkata City, India during November 2016. By February 2020, 1,141 households were reached through 29 community toilets located in the B.B. Hall, Sick Line, and Sonai areas. The once dilapidated community toilets now have separate toilet blocks for male and female, change rooms with incinerators, bathing space, urinals, and wash basins, along with an operation and maintenance system. Mission Sunehra Kal, that is being pursued by ITC Limited and Water For People India, has not only brought a running supply of water and electricity to these community toilets, but has also negated the difficulties that its community members faced to carry out their most basic sanitation activities.

As part of their operation and maintenance mechanism, groups of toilet users formed. ‘Mohalla Unit Committees’ were formed for each community toilet block and were later grouped in ‘Sunehra Sangh’ umbrella committees. The objective of this document is to describe the record keeping practices and functions of the Mohalla Unit Committees and Sunehra Sanghs of the B.B. Hall, Sick Line, and Sonai communities.

2. Sunehra Sangh: Formation and Role in Community Sanitation

For community development, members need to take collective action to generate solutions for common problems. During this process, individuals and groups of people are empowered to take conscious decisions and harness skills to affect change within their community. This mobilization is created by social groups working for a common agenda.

Initially, Water For People was introduced to opinion leaders in B.B. Hall, Sick Line, and Sonai by the Councilor of Ward 80, where dilapidated community toilets would be renovated. These opinion leaders, initially as members of the Mohalla Unit Committees (MUC), helped execute construction work, keep construction materials safe, take crucial decisions regarding finalisation of tariffs for using the facilities, and ascertain operating costs. The primary objective was to address operation and maintenance of renovated toilets, spread awareness about importance of community sanitation, inculcate a sense of responsibility and duty among the members toward maintaining cleanliness of the area, and ensure functionality of the community toilets. With more community toilets being renovated and simultaneous formation of the MUCs, there was a need to form an umbrella Sunehra Sangh to oversee the work of the MUCs.

The Sunehra Sangh focuses more on community development, whereas the MUCs are accountable to the users of their toilet. As Sunehra Sangh is chosen members of the MUC, they play a facilitation role to provide direction to the MUCs.

2.1. Mohalla Unit Committee and its Role

The MUCs are formed of user members residing close to the toilet. Their primary responsibility is to collect monthly user fees, identify defaulters, collect dues, pay operating costs, ensure toilet cleanliness, maintain accounts and records, and oversee work. For B.B. Hall, there are five MUCs for six toilet blocks; for Sonai, there are nine MUCs for ten toilet blocks; in Sick Line, there are eight MUCs for nine toilet blocks.

At B.B. Hall, the repair and upgradation of all existing community toilets is complete, and the Councillor of Ward 80 has recently taken an initiative to concretize the road through which heavy trucks and trailers pass, improve water connectivity and drainage, and raise the ground level to avoid water logging. The residents now find it more convenient to help facilitate the development work through MUCs and Sunehra Sangh.
2.2. Mobilising Community through Committees

Water For People undertakes hygiene promotion activities to raise the awareness level of the community. MUCs and Sunehra Sangh play an important role by convening awareness meetings, assembling users, and sharing the agenda. The acceptability of the messages increases when the messages are passed in presence of the Sunehra Sangh members. The Sunehra Sangh has also convinced defaulters and new users to adopt the practice of paying for services to maintain toilets for their good.

2.3. Monitoring Hygiene Practices & Proper Usage of Toilet Blocks

Community sanitation focuses on improving sanitation awareness and availability of improved sanitation infrastructure to the community. Program sustenance requires conversion of learning into practice. Monitoring helps ensure people do not revert to open defecation and that toilets are maintained. The MUCs must maintain a sense of responsibility to take conscious choices for betterment of their community.

Support of opinion leaders was garnered by making them members of MUCs. They helped introduce a system of payment for using sanitation facilities in the community. Previously, community members used the toilets for free, with an occasional minimum payment when toilets needed to be cleaned. Water For People sought to change community attitudes by making users shoulder responsibility of toilet maintenance charges. Payment for services requires ensuring functionality of the toilets, as the residents would create a ruckus if paid services are not delivered. This dynamic of ‘give and take policy’ between the MUC and the rest of the community was channelled in a positive way, where MUC members ensured their presence by monitoring hygiene practices within the community, following up with defaulters, and addressing stealing of equipment from the toilets. This also helped during the construction process, as construction materials are kept in the open and needed to be safeguarded from being stolen. Water For People continued skill building of the MUC members to keep momentum going for the initial two years, with gradual withdrawal.

2.4. Managing Finance

Existing community toilets were ill maintained. Many toilets had no doors, no drainage, and some were beyond repair. There was no regularized system of pooling funds for toilet maintenance as nobody was willing to take the lead in persuading defaulters for payment, house to house collection, and keeping of accounts.

MUCs decided to implement monthly charges per family for enjoying sanitation facilities. The MUC pays toilet cleaning charges, maintains accounts, and follows up with defaulters. Monthly payment per family ranges from Rs. 50 – Rs. 70 as decided by individual MUCs. These are recorded in books and presented monthly.

In November 2018, the B.B. Hall MUC, comprised of 1,353 users, had a collection of Rs. 4,890. They had spent Rs. 6,076 against sweeper charges, cleaning materials, electricity charges, and maintenance and repair costs. The balance was spent from a reserve fund. In February 2020, Rs.10,780 were collected, and Rs. 4,879 were spent.

In November 2018, the Sick Line MUC (I & II), with 188 total users, collected Rs. 2,670 and spent Rs. 2,807 against sweeper charges, cleaning materials, electricity charges, and maintenance and repairs. In February 2020, seven more toilets were renovated. Collection was Rs. 16,670, and expenditure was Rs. 17,342. Through all nine community toilets, 1,347 people were reached.
In November 2018, Sonai had one operational unit and reached 200 people. They collected Rs. 2,340 and spent Rs. 1,505. In February 2020, with 10 community toilets and 1,423 users, Rs. 21,430 were collected and Rs. 20,694 were spent.

In February 2020, 26 MUCs collected Rs. 64,586 from 29 community toilets, reaching over 1,000 households and over 8,000 users. Collectively, they spent Rs. 58,533.

MUCS update finances in the operation and maintenance register monthly for each family. This enables them to identify the defaulters for any given month. Monthly expenditures are recorded against the corresponding month’s bills and vouchers. Members of MUCs act as resource persons for the community on water and sanitation issues. Key messages on health, hygiene, water, and sanitation are shared by Water For People staff and MUC members using WhatsApp. Now, the community has a common purpose with a clearer direction and a mechanism to discuss community needs. The responsiveness of the community has improved.

2.4.1. Collection of User Fees

The fixed user fees for families is Rs. 60/family/month; for labourers fees are Rs. 30/labourer/month. MUCs collect these charges against a monthly subscription card for toilet use issued to each family. The collected fees are updated in an operation and maintenance register monthly for each family. This register also identifies the defaulters for any given month. Default generally happens when a family goes on a vacation for a month or two. When this happens, MUC members approach the defaulting family to counsel for clearance of dues.

2.4.2. Role of Sunehra Sangh in Handling Finances

The Sunehra Sangh helps the units to maintain financial records and address defaulting. Over expenditure of one unit is borne by other units, and the Sunehra Sangh ensures that the ownership of the collection lies with the community instead of the MUC. This helps communities make decisions regarding collections. For example, on one occasion, no fee was taken by the users of Units I and II of B.B. Hall during the month that their toilet was being repaired, and other units compensated for the difference.

3. Institution Strengthening and Registration

To avail the various benefits and schemes as offered by the Government, the Sunehra Sangh needs to be institutionalized and registered. Registration of the Sunehra Sangh would give Sanghs a legal recognition, thereby providing the ability to apply for development funds. Moreover, this would allow the Sangh maintain control over the MUCs with a standard operating and maintenance system across the community.

As MUCs begin to have surpluses, there is a need to open bank accounts. The Sunehra Sangh views this as highly beneficial, as MUCs can receive interest on deposits and have the additional benefit of security. Registration would also help the Sunehra Sangh open a bank account.

Registration as a Self-help Group and a Co-operative were overruled as the Sunehra Sangh failed to meet the parameters. Self-help Groups are primarily single-sex groups, and the Sunehra Sangh is gender neutral. A Co-operative involves reaping profits, and the Sunehra Sangh is non-profit. The implementation team of Water For People India thus determined to get the Sunehra Sangh registered under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act, 1961. Under the said act, a society engaged in charitable activities can be registered, and the Sunehra Sangh falls within that ambit. With registration, a mission and by-laws must be developed.
3.1. **By-laws Recommendations**

Every society registered under this act must follow a set of proceedings like holding Annual General Meetings and drafting by-laws. These are required to conceptualise needs and requirements and help Sangh be more organised and recognised. To fulfil these requirements, the users and the project staff of Water For People India sat down with the Sangh members on various occasions to come up with the necessary rules and salient features which were later drafted as by-laws.

By-laws cover most aspects necessary for efficient and smooth functioning of the Sunehra Sangh. The by-laws not only deal with basic elements like aims and objectives, but also elaborate on more complex aspects like the activities and responsibilities of the office bearers and the MUCs. For instance, they provide a comprehensive list of activities that the Sunehra Sangh ought to undertake, such as development of slums, awareness programmes on spread of communicable diseases, and other health awareness programmes such as social aspects of pregnant and lactating women, adolescents, and children. These activities also include initiatives for cleanliness of the area.

The by-laws provide a formation process for Sunehra Sangh and the manner in which office bearers should be elected or nominated. In this way, the responsibilities of the office bearers (i.e., President, Secretary, and Treasurer) are defined. By-laws also include the manner of opening a bank account and the character of quorum, among other guidelines.

Thus, by-laws lay the groundwork for development and healthy growth of Sunehra Sangh.

3.2. **Risks and Challenges**

Challenges include risk of displacement, as these are unregistered slums, and limited coverage by development projects. With very few income opportunities, people cannot afford to develop their homes.

As user fees only cover operation and maintenance costs, savings are insufficient for major repairs. Moreover, members of both Sunehra Sangh and MUCs currently work voluntarily and could risk disbanding if they are not compensated. Registration of Sunehra Sangh would further demand more effort in terms of bookkeeping, annual audits, and other legal requirements. The Sunehra Sangh needs to be oriented on the working principles of a registered organisation, maintenance of a minimum bank balance, finalisation of office bearers and their roles, and, most importantly, increasing user fees to compensate MUC members.

4. **Discussion with Sunehra Sangh and MUC Members**

Since their formation, continuous discussions were held with members of the MUCs and Sunehra Sangh, focused on their need for improved sanitation facilities. Renovation work was initiated with a common understanding these would be paid services and that users ensure functionality of the toilets. As the operation and maintenance system was new, Water For People provided initial support to set up different user fees for households, migrant labourers, and truckers.

Water For People conducted follow-up visits to ensure the Sunehra Sangh and MUCs were using the system correctly and make any required rectifications. Water For People also facilitated major changes in the operation and maintenance system, such as the reformation of Sunehra Sangh and MUCs. Reformation was needed as the existing members were accused by other users of mismanagement. A newer body of both Sunehra Sangh and MUC were formed with consensus of the users to help sustain operation and maintenance system.
With time, Water For People has decreased their presence in the B.B. Hall area and now only serves in an observer capacity. Water For People continues an active presence in the Sick Line and Sonai communities.

The Sunehra Sangh members gave users the liberty to pay up their subscription by the 20th day of the month, failing which they are considered as defaulters. The members responsible for the collection go to the users’ houses and collect the subscription. Upon completion of the subscription collection, records are cross-checked with the amount received to ensure accuracy.

The Sunehra Sangh wants to maintain the health benefits enjoyed by the users, as well as the knowledge and skills they have acquired since inception of this project. Users are interested in sustaining the Sunehra Sangh, to maintain accountability of all users in maintenance of the toilets and address health-related issues like sanitation and hygiene.

4.1. Sanitation Awareness

The Sunehra Sangh have heard the term “sanitation” but have limited its meaning to refraining from open defecation, maintaining cleanliness of community toilets, and waste management. With nine community toilets spread across the community, a lot of work related to drainage, waste management, community cleanliness, and personal hygiene still needs to be addressed. This requires the Sunehra Sangh to lead and strengthen members of the committees and act as resource persons.

Sick Line is home to 900 families living in narrow alleys and no drainage system. The canals are filled with refuse and overflowing in some areas. The open space in the community is muddy and filled with filth, and children move barefooted. The Sunehra Sangh and MUC have a huge opportunity to create awareness on solid and liquid waste management and cleaning of the area for a healthy environment.

4.2. MUC Coordination

Active members from blocks are selected to join the MUC, and the work is divided through group discussions based on skills of the members. The office bearers are selected unanimously amongst the committee members, based on how responsible they are. These are primarily volunteer positions and are not paid. In B. B. Hall Sunehra Sangh, there is one paid position, Ms. Kajal Kumari Singh, who looks after the accounts of one of the units and receives Rs. 500 per month.

The committee meets once every month to deal with topics like working environment, operation and maintenance, communication, and cooperation. Failure to pay the subscription by a member is handled by counselling. A small fine is imposed, and members can pay the defaulting amount with the next month’s subscription. Good practises are given recognition and appreciation by the committee, and some members have been expelled to allow for better functioning.

4.3. Sick Line Sunehra Sangh

The Sunehra Sangh of Sick Line is comprised of 12 females and three males and supports eight MUCs of 39 members (32 females and seven males). The primary responsibility of the Sunehra Sangh is to resolve issues related to the community toilets, maintenance and repairs, and looking after their cleanliness. The MUC forms sub-groups, delegates responsibility accordingly, and engages in a participative decision-making process. The filing and documents are maintained by Ms. Nabanita Das, and she provides information among members to help execute the work. Mr. Satinder, as the head of the Sunehra Sangh, helps in taking crucial decisions.
4.3.1. Finance and Bank Account

The collections in January and February 2020 were Rs. 16,040 and Rs. 16,670, respectively. Whilst there have been defaulters, as identified by the members in charge of collection, they generally pay the defaulting amount with the subscription for the next month. There has been no surplus, and the money is kept in the custody of Mr. Satinder and Ms. Nabanta. The Sunehra Sangh intends to get registered, as it wants recognition and community development, and also seeks to open a bank account.

4.3.2. Vision, Mission, Training, and Development

The Sunehra Sangh members share their vision and mission with MUCs, and there have been no significant changes in the operation and maintenance model or the proceedings of the MUCs since its inception. The current focus of both the Sangh and MUCs is continuing operation and maintenance. At a later stage, the plan is to explore waste management options and open a bank account. The Sangh has provided training and development programs, such as hygiene education, document filing, improving cleanliness of the area, helping newly formed MUCs adapt to the systems of paid services, regularising meetings to address smooth collection of user fees, and encouraging discussion among MUC members on community cleanliness and personal hygiene.

4.4. B.B. Hall Sunehra Sangh

The Sunehra Sangh of B.B. Hall, comprised of eight males and three females, was formed to manage maintenance, finance, and repairs. The Sunehra Sangh oversees five MUCs of 24 members (15 females and nine males). The MUCs collect user fees, keep the balance, maintain documents, and share monthly reports with the Sunehra Sangh.

4.4.1. Finance and Bank Account

In January and February 2020, Rs. 5,420 and Rs. 10,780 were collected. There were a few defaulters who paid a small fine. Records are maintained by each unit, and the money stays in the custody of each unit. The Sangh aims to get registered, as the members plan to open a bank account for the security it offers.

4.4.2. Vision, Mission, Training, and Development

The Sangh shares its vision and mission with members of the MUC. Although each community toilet has separate needs, collectively, they attempt to work with a common vision. There have been small changes both in operation and maintenance models and the proceedings since inception. The focus of the Sangh is cleanliness of the area and maintenance of the community toilets. It also plans to remove the loitered garbage and build a garden. The Sangh has taken up initiatives like training and development, counselling and coaching, and awareness programs to improve the condition of the area.

4.5. Sonai Sunehra Sangh

The Sunehra Sangh of Sonai is comprised of nine members, six males and three females, and oversees eight MUCs comprised of 40 members (14 males and 26 females).

4.5.1. Finance and Bank Account

In January and February 2020, Rs. 18,900 and Rs. 21,430 were collected. Records are maintained by each unit, and the money stays in the custody of each unit.
4.5.2. Vision, Mission, Training, and Development

Several trainings were conducted with Sonai community members on personal health and hygiene, handwashing steps, and using the incinerator for safe disposal of used sanitary napkins. Being close to B.B. Hall, Sonai residents were aware of Water For People’s sanitation work, which helped with acceptance of new operation and maintenance systems.

5. Recommendations

Community toilet users and MUC members are oblivious to the merits of getting the committee registered. For them, there is no difference between getting registered and opening a bank account. Water For People should facilitate an exposure visit with the members of the community to a small community based organisation, with a similar setting, engaged in waste recycling to compost fertiliser, kitchen gardening, and other development work, while simultaneously running a registered development organisation. The members need to be given an informed choice, and a visualisation could help overcome initial fear.

Water For People should facilitate activities to improve cleanliness in the area. These activities could include exposure visits with newer committees to facilitate knowledge exchange and see the extent of development work underway.

Furthermore, the records maintained by the MUC members, albeit satisfactory, could be improved. For instance, in the case of B.B. Hall, they should maintain three different books instead of compiling all the heads in a single book. Water For People should provide training for proper filing, numbering, and stapling of vouchers, as poor financial management would jeopardise the operation and maintenance system.

Moreover, the MUC members need to be absolutely clear about what they need to do to develop their community, including funding support. Identified needs could include projects to create and maintain social resources such as community nutrition gardens, children education, beautification, and waste management.

6. Conclusion

The MUCs and Sunehra Sanghs are the products of awareness generation and a sense of responsibility and self-reliance among communities. It is through hard work and the initiatives undertaken by local opinion leaders like Nabanita Das and Satinder of Sick Line, Bholo and Rajnath Singh of B.B. Hall, and Ramjiban of Sonai, as well as Water For People project staff, that these committees are up and running. However, they still lack a legal recognition which can only be attained through registration. Among numerous other benefits, once registered, the Sanghs will be treated as separate legal entities and will have a right to lease, buy, and sell properties, borrow money, and enter into contracts in their names. Functional Sanghs would ensure paid sanitation services are continued even after dwellers migrate and new people arrive in communities. Thus, it is essential to get the Sangh registered so they can grow and expand. The learnings would be replicated for others to have an opportunity to access reliable sanitation services.
Annex I: Images of the Records

Image 1: Subscription card of B.B. Hall

Image 2: Community toilet expenditure sheet of B.B. Hall

Image 3: Fee summary of B.B. Hall
Image 8: Fee summary of Sick Line

Image 9: Subscription Card of Sick Line
Shacks made of combustible material

A toilet in Sonai

A renovated community toilet