

***MSc Findings and Recommendations Report  
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***Informal sanitation jobs: the prospects of enhancing the status of  
pit-emptiers in Bangladesh***

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## **MSc Findings and Recommendations Report**

**MSc Dissertation Title:** Informal sanitation jobs: the prospects of enhancing the status of pit-emptiers in Bangladesh.

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### **1. Overview**

Although it was declared illegal by the Government in the 1980s (Parkinson and Quader, 2008), manual pit-emptying is a widespread practice in Bangladesh. Pit-emptiers have many obstacles to sustain their livelihoods including; occupational health risks, financial insecurities, social stigma and limited access to assets. Recently, a growing number of organisations have implemented projects to improve the living standards of pit-emptiers through building their capacities and skills, bridging the gaps between pit-emptiers (of different socio-economic, religious and ethnic groups), and between the public and private sectors. A limited amount of literature has discussed the significance of these attempts. There is also a lack of data about this marginalised group. Drawing on recently conducted fieldwork, this study outlines how Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Governmental Organisations (GOs) contribute to providing sustainable livelihoods for pit-emptiers in Bangladesh.

### **2. Methods**

A qualitative study was conducted from 26/06/2018 to 16/07/2018 in Dhaka, Faridpur and Khulna, Bangladesh. The study investigated the status of various pit-emptier groups and their relations with relevant stakeholders. A total of 7 FGDs and 15 interviews were conducted. The findings were analysed against the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) (DFID, 2001) to identify the strengths and weakness of the pit-emptying cases. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Leeds, UK for the study.

### **3. Key Findings**

The study covered the following cases of pit-emptying groups:

#### **3.1. Informal Sweeper Colonies (Manual Emptiers)**

- **Dhaka Sweepers Colony:** A group of male and female Christian 1 reside in this colony, offering manual emptying services to institutions and households. They face a number of occupational health risks, as they work at night, without personal protective equipment (PPE) and using basic tools (such as buckets and spades). As the group receives no external support, they lack essential assets, including; human capital (e.g. human resources development), physical (e.g. PPE, vacuum tankers, information and public services) and financial assets (e.g. savings, credit, loans). Emptiers voiced concerns that they are losing their jobs to Muslim Bengalis, who are entering the pit-emptying market, and that they face discrimination when seeking alternative livelihood options.

- Sonadanga Sweepers Colony: A group of male low-caste Hindu sweepers reside in this colony. They offer informal manual or mechanical emptying services according to the households' preference. Although the members occasionally use PPE provided by Khulna City Corporation (KCC), they are vulnerable to occupational health risks, as they work at night using basic tools. Similar to the Dhaka colony, the pit-emptiers feel their jobs are threatened by Muslim Bengalis and masons, who are increasingly entering the market. Sondadanga Sweepers Colony has obtained registration from KCC, but argue this has not improved their livelihoods, as they still lack access to physical, financial, social and human capitals. For instance, despite the efforts of SNV in raising their capacity, they are not able to obtain loans, face ongoing discrimination, and are burdened by financial insecurities.

The livelihood outcomes for the above groups are limited income, reduced wellbeing and high vulnerability; they lack self-esteem, the sense of control and inclusion due to the restrictions or negative involvement of the public sector within their business or regarding the poor services (housing security, water, sanitation, electricity, healthcare and education) provided to their residential colonies.

### 3.2. Formal Government Employees (Manual Emptiers)

- Government Workers: Muslim Bengalis who live in government housing colonies in Dhaka are also engaged in manual pit-emptying, either as a daily labourers or permanent employees. While both permanent and daily workers are poorly paid (receiving daily payments via a bank), the research suggests that the permanent workers are in more secure positions than the daily labourers, as they have a guaranteed monthly income, partial health insurance from the city corporation and are included in the government emptiers' union. Daily labourers, on the other hand, are poorly paid, do not receive any additional benefits, and lack financial security. Both permanent and daily labourers were found to work in highly hazardous environments without any PPE. The permanent workers also have few alternative livelihood options, as they live in the government colony for 'sweepers only', with little decision-making power. Leaving may mean losing their access to key physical assets, such as housing.

### 3.3. Formal Cooperatives (Mechanical Emptiers)

- Bandhabpalli Cleaners' Labour Cooperative Society Ltd.: A group of low caste Hindus reside in this sweeper's colony in Faridpur. The registered cooperative has 25 members of previously informal manual emptiers. Since 2016, they have been providing mechanised emptying in line with Faridpur Municipality (FM) and NGO Practical Action (PA). Thanks to this cooperation, they have access to human resources development (e.g. training and capacity building), physical assets (they lease a vacuum tanker from FM), and live in a relatively better social status. Despite progress, the cooperative members are vulnerable to the regular break-down of the designated vacuum tanker and financial burdens from the leasing fees, operation and maintenance costs, days lost due to the tanker's breakdown, poor demand during dry seasons and poor health during winter.
- Kuthibari Cleaners' Labour Cooperative Society Ltd.: A group of Muslim Bengalis reside in this sweeper's colony in Faridpur. The registered cooperative has 33 founding members, and 85 adherents. Like the above cooperative, they were licensed in 2016, provide mechanised emptying, have access to human resources development, access to physical assets and relatively better social status; though their children did not approve of their parents doing this job, and are seeking alternative livelihoods. The cooperative members are all municipal workers with relative livelihood security. However, they still suffer from poor health during winter, and do not regularly wear PPE.

The livelihood outcomes for the two cooperatives increased dramatically; especially in terms of wellbeing and reduced vulnerability. That aside, income varied between the cooperatives. Kuthibari Cleaners' Labour Cooperative Society Ltd.'s income increased immensely, for instance, and the cooperative bought land and provided financial support to their members, whereas the Bandhabpalli Cleaners' Labour Cooperative Society Ltd. did not achieve such outcomes. Previous literature presumes that mechanical emptying is financially unsustainable in Bangladesh, due to the regular break-down of trucks and equipment, and high operation and maintenance costs, which are difficult to recover (Opel and Bashar, 2013). These findings resonate with the above case studies. Also, although the cooperatives lease tankers with subsidised rates, and receive capacity building and technical support from PA; after two years they are not self-sufficient, as cannot afford large-scale truck repairs. Hence, this study argues that the outcomes may not sustain, unless other arrangements are in place; e.g. affordable technologies to own.

#### **4. Recommendations**

This research highlights that engagement between pit-emptiers, NGOs and government agencies is important to provide decent work for all, to improve livelihoods' outcomes and contribute to quality sanitation services in Bangladesh. Some practical steps for NGOs and GOs include:

- Mobilise government workers and the civil society organisations to advocate for the workers' rights. By educating them to increase their personal, interpersonal and/or political power.
- Ensure that mechanical emptying also prioritises the worker's wellbeing and livelihood's sustainability to ensure they become self-reliant and organised.
- Promote human rights to decent work regardless of religious, socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds, reduce disparities and enhance collaboration between the various emptying groups to ensure fair access to assets and the market. Also, create incentives for workers to join the formal sector by safeguarding their wellbeing.
- Build on the national conference of sanitation workers, and Faecal Sludge Management (FSM) network in Bangladesh. Continue to mobilise communities and organisations while promoting FSM to enhance professionalisation of the sanitation work and minimise stigma for pit emptier workers and their families.

#### **5. Acknowledgements**

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