Universal Periodic Review of Bangladesh, 4th Cycle

Summary of the joint NGO submission by Simavi (main submitting organisation), DORP, GRAUS, Hope for the Poorest, Practical Action, Tahzingdong, Uttaran

All references can be found in the full report, only new references are in the endnote

The human rights to water and sanitation

Previous UPR of Bangladesh

1. The UPR report submitted by Bangladesh in 2018 mentioned that the government has set a specific target to ensure safe drinking water for all by 2020. It planned to ensure 100% access to sanitary latrines in urban area and 90% in rural area by 2020. Recommendations no. 147.108 and 147.106 of the UPR 3rd Cycle, both of which were supported by Bangladesh, highlighted the issues of access to safe drinking water and sanitation for poor neighbourhoods and rural areas. However, insufficient measures have been since then, and more emphasis is needed on sanitation, and water quality among others. One instrument, the Pro-Poor Strategy, has been adopted to provide water and sanitation services to the poor. However, the level of implementation is highly dependent on initiatives taken within development cooperation programmes with non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Present scenario

i.i Water availability and accessibility

Simavi and partners warmly welcome the regular improvements on access to safe drinking water in Bangladesh, but remain deeply concerned that:

(a) 15% of the population in Bangladesh does not have access to water on premises, and only 59% of the population is covered by safely managed drinking water;
(b) There are drastic disparities across the country:
- Ethnic minorities are insufficiently addressed in national plans, policies, and strategies affecting water and sanitation.
- Minority ethnic people have much lower access to water on premises, and spend greater time collecting water than people from the Bengali population
- Women face risks of violence when accessing drinking water sources that are not on premise due to the distance to fetch the water in particular in certain rural areas.
- Water logging makes accessibility to the water sources difficult and girls, women, elderly, pregnant and persons with disabilities (PWDs) suffer the worst from water logging with the consequence of lack of access to water and sanitation facilities and services.

The government of Bangladesh should intensify its effort to guarantee access to drinking water for the entire population, particularly the most marginalized groups, women, and those from ethnic minorities and should particularly:

(a) increase investments in sustainable infrastructure, particularly in areas where access is limited or non-existent, to increase access to safely managed drinking water for all, with a special attention to women and ethnic minorities;

(b) Identify the most marginalized groups and ethnic minorities that are underserved by water and sanitation services; and
- adopt targeted measures aimed at accelerating access to safe drinking water for the most marginalized groups, ethnic minorities, tea pickers, rural population, women and girls, and coastal population, within water-related national plans, policies and strategies related to water.

i.ii. Water quality

Simavi and partners are deeply concerned that:

(a) pollution is still a serious problem in Bangladesh, in particular in relation with tannery industry and use of pesticides. Regulations aiming to monitor business entities do not conduct human rights due diligence, in particular in relation to the human right to water;
(b) 80% of household drinking water (including from pipes) is contaminated with E-Coli, suggesting a high prevalence of fecal contamination. E-coli contamination is common in Simavi's implementation areas in the coastal belt, as evident from baseline and endline studies;
(c) arsenic poisoning remains a public health issue in Bangladesh. This is due to
    (i) the high level of arsenic contaminated water (estimated to 13% of water sources, and common in Simavi programme areas in the coastal belt according to baselines and endlines). This contamination is now also found in deeper aquifers due to overextraction of groundwater, therefore affecting also the population that uses deep tubewells instead of shallow tubewells to prevent drinking contaminated water.
    (ii) the agricultural sector using arsenic-contaminated water to cultivate staple crop;
(d) Almost all coastal districts of Bangladesh in the southwest region of the country are affected by saline (surface and ground) causing various health related problems[i];
(e) the population covered with water services drops substantially when taking into account water contamination, making it regularly unsafe to drink;
(f) Bangladesh is highly dependent on groundwater, being the 6th country with the largest estimated groundwater extraction. Overextraction increases the presence of arsenic in deep aquifers exposing the population to health risks when arsenic-polluted water is used for drinking and food production.

The government of Bangladesh should intensify its efforts to guarantee safe water, free from any contamination, accessible for the entire population, including through regular testing of water sources, and should in particular:

(a) address urgently the negative impacts of economic and industrial activities on the water quality, in particular tannery activities, including by
    - **adopting legislation aiming at regulating and monitoring business entities whose activities have an impact on water quality;**
(b) Execute plans and strategies to eliminate E-coli contamination by establishing a proper sustainable system for the management and treatment of wastewater as well as a proper sewage system;

(c) Implement a proper mechanism to reduce exposure to arsenic through drinking water and food consumption, by (i) scaling up the use of already available arsenic removal technologies, and establishing a monitoring mechanism to ensure provision of safe drinking water for the population in arsenic contaminated areas, and (ii) raising awareness among the population in arsenic contaminated areas on available methods to reduce exposure to arsenic contamination and mitigate its health impacts.

(d) Zone out freshwater bodies and protect them from economic activities based on saline water;

(e) Execute the plan of establishing water quality testing labs in each administrative unit of local governments, including sufficient budget for kits and resource personnel, and regularly monitor water quality at all water points;

(f) Take additional measures to increase surface water treatment as a sustainable solution to reduce dependency on groundwater.

i.iii The right to sanitation

While commending the dramatic reduction of the open defecation practice in Bangladesh, the improvement of access to sanitation across the country, and the existence of the Feacal Sludge Management Institutional and Regulatory Framework and the National Action Plan for Faecal Sludge Management, Simavi and its partners remain concerned by:

(a) The continuing disparities and inequalities as to access to improved sanitation facilities (85% for Bengali household versus only 50% of minority ethnic households), as to unaffordable safe infrastructure causing physical risks to children in certain areas, and as to the occurrence of open defecation still practiced among the poorest people (5% of the population in the poorest wealth quantiles compared to less than 1% nationally according to the JMP data);

(b) The lack of appropriate fecal sludge management across rural and urban Bangladesh, with the vast majority of human excreta being discharged into the environment including open waters, impacting the rights to water, sanitation, health, and the right to a healthy environment among others;

(c) The lack of awareness of the population on sustainable and environmentally safe sanitation practices, in particular the importance of environmentally safe emptying of sceptic tanks and pits.

The government of Bangladesh should fully implement the right to sanitation for the entire population and should particularly:

(a) Accelerate the progress on access to improved toilet facilities that are safe, affordable, and acceptable, prioritizing communities with a higher level of poverty and marginalization;

(b) Implement existing plans to regulate and monitor the entire sanitation chain, and establish fecal sludge management services with all relevant stakeholders to prevent risks of contamination of water sources, and negative health impacts arising from environmental pollution;

(c) Undertake nation-wide awareness-raising initiatives on the importance of environmentally friendly and safe sanitation practices, including environmentally safe emptying of sceptic tanks and pits, to reduce discharge of fecal sludge in the environment.

[i] Uttaran, Finding Fresh Water in a Changing Climate: Policy Strategy gand Technology in the Southwest Coastal Region of Bangladesh, 2021, https://uttaran.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Fresh-Water.pdf, pp. 17, 71.