Youth in Action towards Sustainable Development Goal 6
Challenges, Opportunities and Way Forward

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বাংলাদেশ ও এজেন্ডা ২০৩০
তারুণ্যের প্রত্যাশা

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Background

Clean water, decent toilets and good hygiene are basic human rights, and central to the advancement and well-being of young people. Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) are linked to wider development outcomes such as cognition, nutrition, well-being and dignity—all of which bear particular relevance for adolescent and youth groups, who are in a transitional phase where the foundations for long-term health and social outcomes are laid. The essentiality of WASH is clearly captured in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6—clean water and sanitation, which seeks to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

Despite the foundational nature of WASH in human development, it is often a neglected issue amongst youth, who often struggle with serious WASH deprivations. Young people living in hard-to-reach areas, such as the water-scarce coastal region, or those who belong to marginalised groups, such as sweeper communities or slum residents, often have very limited access to safe drinking water or clean, secure sanitation facilities. Young women and girls are most affected by these challenges, as they often bear much of the burden of water and sanitation related responsibilities in households. In the coastal areas, this often means long hours spent in carrying water from scarce freshwater sources—time that could be spent on studies or other productive pursuits. Where sanitation services are poor, such as in slums, young girls are more exposed and vulnerable to security threats when needing the toilet.

Another area of particular relevance to youth and WASH is public and educational settings, where young people spend much of their time.

WASH in Secondary Schools (bar chart, Per cent, 0–100). Legend: Basic, Limited, None/Unimproved.
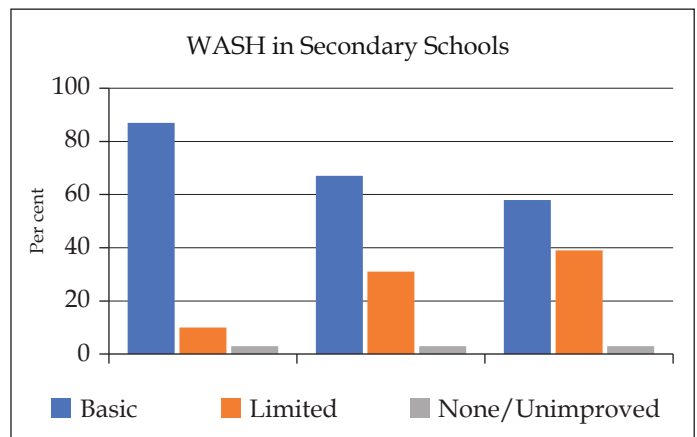
Source: Authors' compilation from UNICEF and WHO (2018).
Note: Total percentage may exceed 100 per cent due to statistical rounding.

According to a Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) report this year on WASH in educational institutions[1], Bangladesh has a coverage of 87 per cent basic drinking water sources at the secondary school level, while basic sanitation coverage at secondary schools is at 67 per cent. Additionally, adequate hygiene facilities are available in only 58 per cent of secondary schools. The Bangladesh National Hygiene Baseline Survey (BNHBS) found that there was only one toilet available to 187 students on average[2]. Therefore, serious attention should be given to WASH access and infrastructure in educational institutions, from policy formulation to implementation and monitoring, and engaging youth in these initiatives to achieve SDG 6.

Opportunities for Youth Engagement in SDG 6

While there are multiple organisations who are working to provide access to safe water and sanitation for all by 2030, there is still a wide scope to sensitise youth towards WASH issues. This includes both prioritising young peoples' WASH rights and challenges, such as the critical issue of menstrual hygiene management (MHM), as well as supporting and facilitating youth to become change agents in Bangladesh's WASH landscape, given the country's huge youth population and their central role in determining future progress.

In case of MHM for example, the BNHBS 2014 found that 40 per cent of girls reported missing school for an average of three days a month during their menstruation, and one-third of them felt that menstruation affected their performance in schools. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has been working on school sanitation complexes with the support of different non-goverment organisations (NGOs) and development partners, that include facilities to manage periods in privacy and with dignity. While student bodies such as the Student Cabinet have been involved in these programmes in some areas, there is a need to put young people at the heart of such initiatives, and view them as equal stakeholders with an active role in design and implementation across the board.

In terms of developing youth into the next generation of WASH leaders, there have been some initiatives in recent years to involve youth more closely in research and advocacy around WASH issues. Young people are also being involved in some WASH programmes as

Bringing young people's voice into WASH discussion
WaterAid Bangladesh partnered with Shorno Kishoree Network Foundation (SKNF) to hold a district-level competition to select schools with gender-appropriate sanitation options, and a national essay contest on the importance of proper sanitation for girls. SKNF also organised a televised talk show on MHM in schools, where the essay contest winners (in the photo) shared their writings and engaged in a panel discussion.

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[1] UNICEF and WHO. (2018). *Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools: Global Baseline Report 2018*. New York: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO). Retrieved from:http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/jmp-wash-in-schools/en/

[2] ICDDR,B, WaterAid Bangladesh, PSU, LGD, MoLGRD. (2014). *Bangladesh National Hygiene Baseline Survey: Preliminary Report*. Dhaka: International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B), WaterAid Bangladesh, Policy Support Unit (PSU), Local Government Division (LGD), Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives (MoLGRD). Retrieved from:https://itn.buet.ac.bd/-publications/sector-documents/documents/bnhbs.pdf

volunteers, and have been a vocal and visible promoter of public toilets in Dhaka city in the past year. This marks the start of a longer journey to involve youth as partners, rather than beneficiaries. However, youth can be a powerful agent for progress and change across a number of challenging areas in WASH, particularly those relating to behavioural change. Young people can act as peer educators who support their friends and communities adopt better handwashing behaviour, practice proper menstrual hygiene, and encourage healthy practices such as regular deworming. Developing youth as key networkers and influencers has the potential to not only benefit their immediate family and community, but also create a cohort of WASH champions who would ensure that positive habits are engrained and progress is sustained in the long run.

Key Challenges

- Youth in hard-to-reach areas of the country face various WASH-related challenges, including water scarcity and salinity in coastal areas, arsenic contamination in arsenic-prone areas, and lack of proper WASH infrastructure and access in char, haor, hilly and slum areas.
- WASH is still a neglected issue in institutional settings, and often not considered a priority issue amongst young people, their parents, teachers or authorities.
- There is limited space for young people to participate in discussions and decisions around youth-related services, e.g. the government's Student Cabinet Manual is not practiced effectively in all institutions.
- There is a lack of concerted effort and investment in both the public and private spheres to engage youth meaningfully in design and implementation processes.
- Existing policy instruments around WASH for young people, such as the Ministry of Education circular on "improvement of water and toilet facilities at school, college, university, madrassa and vocational level", are not disseminated and implemented properly.

Policy Recommendations

Given these pressing challenges, some key policy recommendations are proposed below to ensure youth-centric and youth-driven access to water and sanitation:

- Prioritise meaningful engagement of youth from all walks of life in WASH policymaking and programmes across government, non-government and civic circles.
- Ensure sufficient allocation of resources to ensure that young people's right to water, sanitation and hygiene are fulfilled in all areas of life, especially for hard-to-reach areas and populations such as coastal, char, haor, hilly and slum areas.
- Prioritise and invest in public and communal WASH facilities that reduce the WASH deprivations faced by youth, especially young women, whether at home, on the road, or in the workplace.
- Ensure proper implementation of policy instruments related to WASH and youth, including the Student Cabinet Manual and the Ministry of Education circular on WASH in every educational institution.
- Develop and disseminate a national circular on "National Standards on Water, Sanitation, & Hygiene for Schools in Bangladesh" jointly endorsed by the GoB and UNICEF.
- Develop WASH standards for all types of educational institution at the national level.
- Develop sound monitoring mechanisms to oversee the implementation of different government policies and circulars related to WASH in educational institutions.

The **Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh** is a civil society initiative, taken at the national front, to contribute to the implementation of globally adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Platform was formally launched in June 2016, at the initiative of a group of individuals; the objective has been to track the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Bangladesh and enhance accountability in its implementation process. The concept of the Platform was inspired by the participatory and multi-stakeholder approach promoted as a vital element for success in the attainment of all the SDGs. The Platform currently includes 88 Partner Organisations working on SDG issues across the country.

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