

Stories from the Frontline



The “Sewer men” Campaign

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About this series, 'Stories from the Frontline'

'Stories from the Frontline' emerge from an Impact Assessment and Shared Learning (IASL) initiative to support critical thinking about and documentation of ActionAid International's rights-based work for transformation and justice. The initiative, which is implemented at country level, aims more generally to strengthen our ability to write about change in an analytical, powerful and effective way. The Stories, written by the staff most intimately connected to our change work in the field or 'at the front', are developed through an empowering writing journey that begins with a five-day critical writing retreat. This is followed by a period of mentorship and peer support to deepen analysis, thinking and writing; and the journey concludes with an editing phase that is strongly oriented to building the confidence of the writers and strengthening their writing skills. Programme staff have been the main target of this initiative, but we have also supported writing about other dimensions of our change practice through policy and campaigns work, and through internal organisational change initiatives.

Please be in contact with Vincent Azumah for more information and support to develop such an initiative.

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The “Sewer men” Campaign

Background of area

Multan is a city in south central Punjab province of Pakistan. It is situated at the immediate east of the Chenab River and is about 966 km from Karachi. It is almost in the center of the country. Multan is also known as the ‘City of Pirs and Shrines’ and a prosperous city of bazaars, mosques, shrines and superbly designed tombs. Multan is separated from Bahawalpur District by the Sutlej river and by the Chenab from Muzaffargarh district.

A circular road around gives access to the city through thirteen gates. Some of the imposing structures of these gates are still preserved. In the bazaars of the Old City one still comes across tiny shops where craftsmen can be seen busy turning out master-pieces in copper, brass, silver as well as textiles in the traditional fashion. Total area of Multan is 5,630 sq. miles (approximately) / 3,721 square Kilometers comprises on 129 union councils in 6 Town and Population as per census report of 1998 - 30, 83000.

The rights issues

The inhabitants of Multan City generate 51 million gallons (mgd) of wastewater daily in summers which reduces to about 40 mgd in winters. WASA (the water supply agency) supplies 40 mgd of fresh water, of which about 12 mgd is pumped through shallow pipelines by households. The city has a combined system collecting domestic, industrial and hospital wastewater as well as the storm water. The network consists of trunk, lateral and local lane level pipes.

About one million persons living in the residential areas are served by the municipal sewerage system, while almost 700,000 persons live in the underserved area where open drains are used for disposing wastewater.

Total number of users who are connected to the WASA sewerage as at 2003 were 126,432 of these only 9333 are formally recorded by WASA. While the rest of people, have obtained connections without approval of WASA. In certain areas the wastewater from the private housing developments falls into the WASAs system. Due to the small number of formal connections which gave way to illegal connections, the system has become technically, financially and operationally unsustainable.

Multan WASA Sewerage Users			
Sr. #	Details	Total (WASA 2003)	Connected
01	Domestic	1,15,307	8,359
02	Commercial	11,039	969
03	Industrial	86	5
Total		1,26, 432	9,333

The blockage, leakage and sanitary condition of the sewer line and main-holes are getting worse by the day. For maintaining and cleaning of sewer system, there are only 693 sewer men providing their services to the whole District of Multan. Unfortunately, the sewer men despite the difficult work, they are also not paid the right wages and do not have the protective gear and requisite tools to work with putting their lives in danger.

Since the last 10 to 15 years, 244 staff have been considered as casual and daily wager Sewer men in blatant violation of their basic right of being recognized as permanent staff having worked that long. Another class of workers, the regular, contract, staff numbering 693 have worked without any social security contributions by their employers. They are also deprived from social welfare facilities and prevented from joining staff Welfare Boards which provides free medical facility, old age benefit and scholarship for their children etc.

Our intervention

The sewer men have been in this situation for many years and have never succeeded in championing any powerful campaign to demand their rights. ActionAid Pakistan in partnership with a local NGO, Ufaq Development Organization (UDO) and union workers of WASA held a reflection session to critically assess the situation.

It led to problem and power analysis which helped the sewer men to identify the source of the right denial and what needs to be done together to demand and claim their rights. This consciousness raising brought about a sewer men's movement on one platform on which they strategized on how to campaign.

Empowerment

Through the analysis sessions and the skills development training and critical reflection process, the sewer men internalized the problem and recognised the strength of their power when combined. They strengthened their once very weak and loose union to a union with democratically elected leaders and with a clear vision of what they want to change and how that can happen and with a clear timelines of activities.

However there were certain limitations on the part of the union structure. Non regular staff like daily wagers could not be part of it because it needed a policy change before that can happen.

Solidarity

ActionAid with the partnership of Ufaq Development Organization (a local NGO) started working with the Unions of WASA for identification of issues and sensitization of the community. All unions of WASA and other stakeholders were brought on one platform where series of awareness sessions were held.

Sensitization of print and electronic media was an integral part of the strategy. Alliance with other workers unions was built to form a strong and powerful voice of the abused. A charter of demands was prepared which was taken forward through an innovative way of holding "corner" meetings and protest rallies. Local lawyers were encouraged to volunteer their services and threatened to sue the line department in court.

The Change

Iqbal Ghumman is a junior clerk working in WASA (Water & Sanitation Authority) since 1992. He is the founder member of Staff Union in WASA. He is a chief executive of Ghazi Union (CBA) WASA. He has been in the forefront in the years' long struggle to get daily wages sewer men regularized.

Iqbal says, “I was disappointed of sporadic efforts being made for the cause of daily wagers but it brought a ray of hope when ActionAid came in. With support of its local partner UDO, ActionAid brought all stakeholders on one platform. Latter we did a power analysis of the situation and prepared a charter of demands. I was astonished to see the commitment, passion and hope working behind the protest rallies.”

‘The most important learning of the coordinated efforts being taken by us was that of applying various tactics to influence the decision makers. It involved extensive lobbying with line department and political representatives of the area. Media was made part of the campaign from the very beginning’, claims Iqbal.

The sewer men rights campaign witnessed a historic moment on the day when more than 600 people including 400 sewer men held protest demonstration in front of Nishtar Auditorium of Multan. They were happy to find that their collective effort had brought local members of national and provincial assemblies as well as district head of line department on the same platform where they had face to face interaction with them. It was for the first time they received such an effective response from high authorities.

A local member of national assembly Rana Mehmood Ul Hassan said, ‘I am honored to address the protest demonstration. It made me realize how badly you (sewer men) were being treated. You work hard to provide services to your fellow citizen and countrymen; hence I will say that you serve humanity. You save lives of millions of people by keeping their sewerage lines clean and working. I advise the line department to take notice of your issues and from this forum; I plead with the Chief Minister of Punjab to provide you assistance from staff welfare fund.’

‘During the campaign phase, two daily wages sewer men died on duty while working in a main sewerage hole. The department refused to compensate for the loss of precious lives by declaring that the deceased employees were not regularized; hence not insured. However on pressing demand by the already charged community, the department conceded to their demands. They paid a little cash in hand and promised to release the remaining 0.2 million rupees to each affected family. It set a precedence for future that God forbids if there is any incident again, the victims would be paid for the loss’, says Iqbal.

Meanwhile, cases that went to court with the support of the lawyers were making the news and the situation forced the line sector department to start negotiating with the sewer men to withdraw the cases.

‘They came to us and requested us to withdraw cases against them. We wanted immediate regularization of the daily wagers. First time, we saw victory very closely. After repetitive negotiation, we struck a deal. The sewer men agreed to withdraw cases on the condition that they would be handed over job confirmation notice first. It was the point of success of the campaign launched by the deprived community. All the workers have been declared permanent employees and they are enjoying a better life. I am thankful to ActionAid and UDO for extending meaningful support to the sewer men’, concluded Iqbal.

What next

There was a reflection forum after the successful campaign. It was learnt that there were many other issues which needed to be taken up. Again issues prioritization exercise was done. The most challenging issue that was picked up for future campaign was linked to registration of sewer men with Social Security and Workers Welfare Board.

The confident Sewer men are sure of another successful campaign and have started with initial campaign meeting to kick start another campaign that promises to be even bigger.