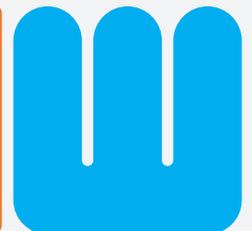


Policy Brief/South Asia
July 2023

Improving social protection for sanitation workers in South Asia



WaterAid

Sanitation workers provide an essential public service. This is key to achieving the ambitious Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6, although poor working conditions mean it is often at the cost of their dignity and health. Strengthening social protection schemes for sanitation workers is important to reduce and compensate for the innate risks and impacts of their profession. WaterAid commissioned a study in Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh to assess sanitation workers' access to such social protection schemes in South Asia. The methodology used household surveys and key informant interviews with various stakeholders, including sanitation workers and government officials in all three countries. The study made recommendations for improving social protection for sanitation workers, addressing SDG 8 on the promotion of decent work for all and SDG target 1.3 on universal social protection systems and measures.

Key messages

- The safety and wellbeing of sanitation workers is paramount to achieve safely managed sanitation and decent work for all.
- Informal sanitation workers need urgent support as they are unable to access social protection schemes due to a range of barriers.
- Targeted social protection schemes for sanitation workers do not exist.
- To improve social protection for sanitation workers, better access to existing schemes and the development of new schemes targeting sanitation workers are vital, together with improved employment security and the formalisation of sanitation worker status.

Current access to social protection schemes



Existing contributory social protection schemes, such as health and life insurance, retirement benefits and pensions, only target formal employees, thereby excluding all informal sanitation workers. Non-contributory social assistance schemes, such as direct cash transfers or food coupons and rations are targeted toward families living in extreme poverty, senior citizens, those with disabilities, and young children;

sanitation workers can access some of these, however, they do not target sanitation workers specifically. All three countries have the constitutional mandate to provide social protection to their citizens, however, most sanitation workers do not benefit from the current contributory and non-contributory schemes due to the barriers listed below.

Barriers to accessing social protection



Sanitation workers face various barriers to social protection schemes including:

- **Increasing informality due to privatisation:** The sanitation workforce in Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh mostly consists of informal sanitation workers. Even sanitation workers in the public and private sectors are becoming increasingly vulnerable with unstable and irregular employment due to subcontracting and ghost employment.
- **Lack of awareness of schemes:** Workers in all three countries reported their lack of awareness of social protection schemes. Neither are they aware of the eligibility criteria, application process and documents required to access these schemes.
- **Caste-based social stigma and marginalisation:** Sanitation workers in all three countries belong to underprivileged and marginalised castes or religious minorities including Christians in Pakistan, low-caste Horizon Hindus and ultra-poor Hela Muslims in Bangladesh and the “kuchikars” caste in Nepal. This discrimination impacts the ability of sanitation workers to approach and communicate with the relevant authorities to access the different schemes.
- **Poor selection process for the identification of beneficiaries and errors in exclusion:** The three studies highlight the lack of institutional mechanisms and databases to ensure the effective targeting of social protection schemes. This has led to biased and elitest selection of beneficiaries at the local level. Furthermore, some targeted schemes have narrow criteria that exclude sanitation workers.
- **Onerous procedures to access schemes:** Sanitation workers experience challenges with lengthy procedures and institutional hurdles (sometimes taking years) and are unable to take leave time to undertake these onerous procedures.
- **Lack of clarity on government roles and responsibilities:** Each country faces its own specific challenges with unclear government roles. In Pakistan, for example, despite decentralised power to the provincial level, independent agencies for each scheme were established at the central level causing confusion over responsibilities. In Nepal, local government has the responsibility to ensure basic health and sanitation, however, in Kathmandu and Lahan, this is carried out by water companies (KUKL and NWSSC) thereby causing an overlap of responsibilities.

Recommendations



1. Improve employment security and formalise the status of sanitation workers

- Ministries responsible for employment, social justice and sanitation should reform and enforce labour regulations to ensure that authorities and businesses employ sanitation workers on a long-term basis.
- Municipal corporations should implement measures to prevent ghost employment.
- Municipal corporations should register and enumerate all sanitation workers, both formal and informal, and keep an up-to-date database of them..

2. Improve access to existing schemes

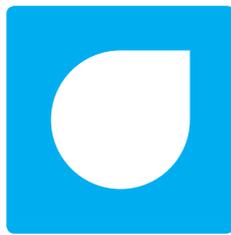
- The national government and regulatory authorities responsible for social security should review the eligibility criteria for existing schemes, including those for both informal and formal sanitation workers.
- National and provincial governments should disseminate information on social protection schemes to sanitation workers and their families.

- Local governments, municipalities and civil society organisations should build the capacity of sanitation workers to engage with application processes and grievance redressal mechanisms.
- National government should simplify the procedures needed to allow and encourage sanitation workers to apply.

3. Develop new schemes for sanitation workers

- National government and insurance authorities should ensure new contributory schemes for sanitation workers (e.g. medical assistance, life insurance, pensions) and include financing mechanisms to ensure partial payment of premiums by respective municipal corporations, boards and companies or by the national government.
- Municipal corporations, local governments and the private sector should allocate resources for specific grants for formally and informally registered sanitation workers, such as a “risk and hardship allowance” and “PPE allowance”.

These recommendations should not be implemented in isolation but as part of a wider set of measures to protect the rights of sanitation workers, including **improving health and safety** (e.g. provision of PPE, standard operating procedures, Emergency Response Units at local level to assist in case of accidents) and **breaking intergenerational exclusion and stigma** (e.g. educational stipends and scholarships, reserving public and private jobs for discriminated castes, public campaigns).



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