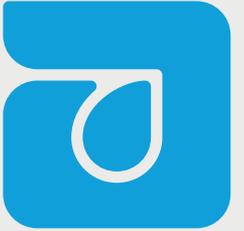
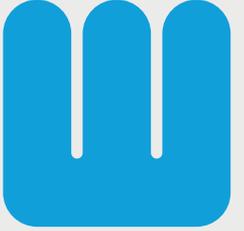
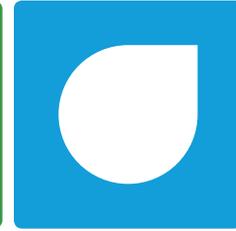




# Improving social protection for sanitation workers in Pakistan



# Introduction



Sanitation workers play a key role in keeping the environment clean and protecting human health. They empty septic tanks, sewer lines and maintenance holes; clean the dry latrines and drains; and perform various operations at the treatment sites. The safety and wellbeing of sanitation workers is paramount to achieve safely managed sanitation by 2030, under the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on clean water and sanitation, and specifically target 6.2, which requires faecal waste to be safely managed along the entire sanitation chain. In some South Asian countries including Pakistan, there is a social stigma attached to their profession. Sanitation workers face poor working conditions and social exclusion and are poorly paid for their services. They suffer frequent occupational hazards that impact their income and health, such as sometimes fatal injuries, without

significant compensatory support. There is a high level of informality in their work, including short-term contracts and daily wages, which increases their precarious situation, with unstable income levels and limited legal and social protection. Well-designed and targeted social security schemes for sanitation workers can help to build resilience, enhance productivity, ensure decent jobs, end intergenerational poverty and deeply entrenched social exclusion. In this context, a study was conducted on access to social protection by sanitation workers in Pakistan to identify the barriers they face and to provide practical recommendations.<sup>1</sup>

# Methodology

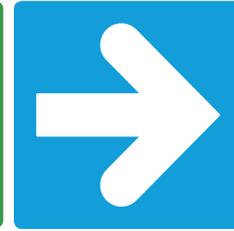


The objective of the study was to assess the current social protection landscape in Pakistan and to identify the key bottlenecks faced by sanitation workers and their families in accessing this. The methodology included a review of national, provincial and private sector social protection schemes and key informant interviews with 78 respondents, including sanitation

workers, union functionaries, and key officials in the corporations, municipalities and waste management companies. The key informant interviews were conducted in Peshawar, Lahore, Karachi and the Islamabad Capital Territory.

<sup>1</sup> The policy brief is based on the findings of a study conducted by Alternate Development Services (Pvt.) Ltd. "Accessing the Social Security of the Sanitary and Sanitation Workers" commissioned by WaterAid Pakistan.

# Findings on access to social protection schemes



Articles 37 and 38 in the constitution of Pakistan enable the provision of social welfare to its citizens specifically for the poor and destitute, while the National Social Protection Strategy (2007) aimed to improve the efficiency of social protection. At present, there is no social protection scheme specifically targeting sanitation workers, however, they can access social insurance programmes and social assistance schemes aimed at the general population. There are different kinds of targeted non-contributory social assistance schemes, mostly linked with direct cash transfer. The contributory social protection schemes (e.g. health and life insurance, retirement benefits and pensions) are only applicable to those formally employed.

## Non-contributory schemes

Non-contributory social assistance schemes are mostly targeted towards families in case of excessive poverty, destitution, death, occupational injury or, occasionally, they are given as crisis management in natural disasters, pandemics etc. Amongst the key schemes are the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) and Kafalat, both unconditional cash transfer schemes targeting the poor and destitute families. The Ehsaas scheme also targets low-income groups and was designed to provide for hardships experienced during Covid-19. Sehat Sahulat Programme (SSP) is a medical assistance scheme for low-income families; the Workers Welfare Fund (WWF) targets industrial workers with multipurpose assistance such as small

grants for marriage, death, education, health services, training, apprenticeships, and skills enhancement. Zakat has a mandate to assist poor, vulnerable and destitute Muslims, and Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (PBM) was initiated to also include non-Muslim destitute families. PBM is a multi-purpose scheme providing small grants for such things as child support, child labour rehabilitation, widows, skills building, and homes for destitute children and elders. Overall, there are many fragmented social protection schemes, duplicate in purpose and yet quite limited in outreach to the sanitation workers.

## Contributory schemes

In terms of contributory schemes, pension and insurance schemes consist of government employees' pension/gratuity schemes, the Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institutions (EOBI), the Employees' Social Security Institutes (ESSIs) and the Workers' Welfare Funds (WWF). The existing social insurance schemes target the formally employed labour force and retirees. Sanitation workers are eligible for the pension programmes if they are formally employed either by the government or the private sector. However, formal municipal employees, their families and union leaders interviewed said that accessing retirement benefits is a tedious and lengthy process due to the administrative complexities.

# Findings on key barriers to accessing social protection



## Increasing Informality

The sanitation sector is rapidly being privatised and in most of the metropolises, sanitation workers are transferred into private entities or increasingly hired by the municipalities on a contractual basis only. In all Pakistan's metropolitan cities and large towns such as Lahore, Karachi and Peshawar, solid waste management companies have taken over waste management, including cleaning sewer lines and faecal sludge management. The larger companies mostly sublet these tasks to other entities. The complexity of subcontracting leads to arrangements where most sanitation workers can be hired and fired without prior notice or compensation. Most of the country's labour laws deal with social security and occupational safety but they do not apply to contractual and unregulated workers.

## Ghost employment

It was reported that several Muslim sanitation workers do not perform the main duty for which they are appointed. Rather, they pay a large percentage of their salary to the actual employees (usually Christian) who carry out the work. Ghost employment impacts and limits access to social security schemes.

## Caste and religion-based social stigma and marginalisation

In Pakistan, mostly marginalised Christian communities (converted from low caste Dalits) are engaged in sanitation work. They are considered to be low in the social hierarchy and face social stigma due to the nature of their work. The social isolation faced by sanitation workers also impacts their communication and ability to approach relevant authorities to access the various schemes. Although PBM serves minorities, coverage is limited and procedures are cumbersome.

## Poor identification and selection of beneficiaries and the exclusion of sanitation workers

The most cited reason for exclusion was the narrow eligibility criteria and limited coverage of the schemes. For instance, the BISP, the largest unconditional cash transfer programme in Pakistan, mostly covers informal wage workers' families (mainly widows and destitute women). Similarly, WWF covers industrial workers and none of the sanitation workers interviewed reported benefiting from the scheme. Sanitation companies and contractors which employ sanitation workers stated that sanitation is not an industry – they are not manufacturers and it is a service – therefore, they do not contribute to WWF to secure social assistance for their sanitation workers.

## Lack of awareness of schemes

Lack of awareness of various social assistance schemes prevents deserving individuals and their families from accessing them. In the study area, awareness of Kafalat, Ehsaas and WWF was limited and many sanitation workers are unaware of the benefits and procedures.

## Cumbersome procedure

Sanitation workers and their families reported lengthy procedural and institutional hurdles to access the benefits resulting in a delay of many years before any pension benefits could be accessed.

## Unclear government roles and responsibilities

In Pakistan, the 18th Constitutional Amendment (2010) devolved the legislative and governing powers of social protection to the provincial departments. However, there are independent agencies set up at central level for each of the

schemes resulting in recentralisation of social security and assistance schemes despite these being devolved to the provinces. No province has yet adequately designed and developed their

own social protection systems. The division of responsibilities remains blurred between the centre and the provinces.

## Recommendations



### 1. Improve employment security and the formalisation of sanitation workers

- National government, specifically ministries dealing with labour, employment and social justice, should reform and enforce labour regulations, redefining sanitation workers as skilled and regulating pay scales and wages accordingly. They should also support the formalisation of informal sanitation workers, so municipal authorities and companies employ them on a long-term basis, ensuring their access to social protection benefits related to pensions, maternity leave, insurance etc.
- Municipal corporations should enumerate and register all sanitation workers, both formal and informal, keeping a database that includes sanitation workers in social security schemes, provides occupation safety training and deters ghost employment.
- EOBI, ESSI and regulatory bodies should ensure that waste management companies register their employees, sanitation workers in particular, so they are covered under insurance and pension schemes.

### 2. Maximise access to existing schemes

- National government, the department and authorities responsible for managing various schemes should identify appropriate eligibility criteria that facilitate the inclusion of sanitation workers in the existing targeted

schemes. For example, eligibility criteria should be broadened to include sanitation workers and their families on schemes such as PBM, BISP and Ehsaas.

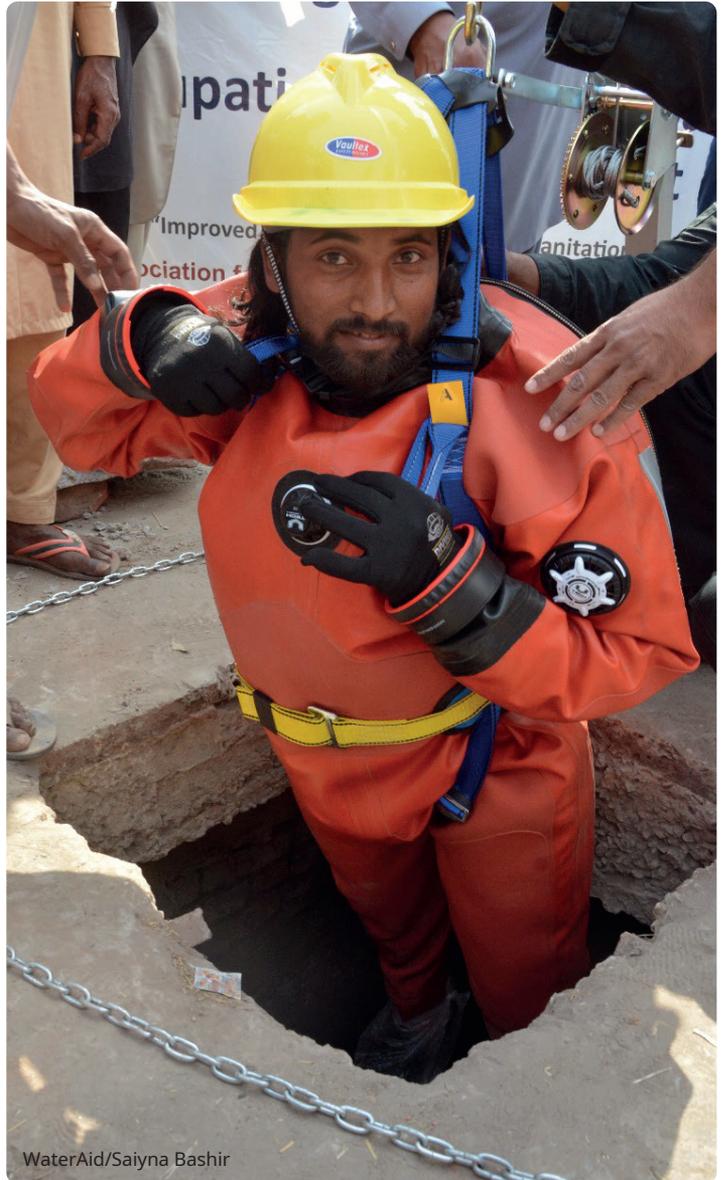
- National and provincial governments should disseminate information widely on social protection so that low-income groups including sanitation workers are encouraged to apply. National and provincial governments, particularly the designated ministries, departments and authorities responsible for specific social justice schemes, should also simplify procedures to assist sanitation workers access schemes and to build their capacity to manage the application processes and use grievance redressal mechanisms.

### 3. Initiate new schemes to improve safety and compensate for work-related risks

- Insurance regulatory bodies and ministries dealing with social justice, labour and employment should expand or complement contributory schemes (medical assistance, life insurance and pensions) to cover both formal and informal workers. They should develop means of financing these schemes that relieve some of the burden on the sanitation workers, for instance, by ensuring partial payment of premiums by respective municipal corporations, boards and companies or through the national or provincial government.

- Municipal corporations, urban bodies and the private sector engaging sanitation workers should allocate resources for specific grants for all formally and informally registered sanitation workers, such as the 'risk and hardship allowance' or the 'PPE allowance'.

It is important that these recommendations to strengthen social protection are not implemented in isolation, but as part of a wider set of measures to protect the rights of sanitation workers, and in particular with measures aimed at ensuring their health and safety (indirectly reducing their need to use social security schemes) and those promoting OHS training, creating local Emergency Response Units to rapidly assist them in times of physical or social crisis. It is also important to eliminate intergenerational exclusion and stigma by providing children of sanitation workers, especially girls, with educational stipends and scholarships for postgraduate or higher degree courses; reserving public and private jobs for discriminated castes engaged in the sanitation profession; and educating people against discrimination due to caste, ethnicity, profession or religion.



**Contact details:**  
Arif Jabbar Khan  
Country Director, WaterAid Pakistan  
[ArifJabbar@wateraid.org](mailto:ArifJabbar@wateraid.org)

**WaterAid Pakistan**

Second Floor, Executive Heights, 65 West Fazl ul Haq Road, Blue Area, Islamabad, Pakistan  
[www.wateraid.org](http://www.wateraid.org)  
[wateraidpakistan@wateraid.org](mailto:wateraidpakistan@wateraid.org)

