

USING INTEGRITY TOOLS TO ENSURE COMMUNITY ACCESS TO SUSTAINABLE AND RELIABLE WATER SUPPLY IN RAJSHAHI DISTRICT, BANGLADESH

Implementation of the Integrity Management Toolbox for Small Water Supply Systems (IMT-SWSS) by DASCOH Foundation

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Design adapted from Diana de Leon

1 Introduction

This case study details the implementation of the Integrity Management Toolbox for Small Water Supply Systems (IMT-SWSS) by the DASCOH Foundation, supported by the Water Integrity Network. The tool was used in two rural water supply schemes in Godagari, Rajshahi District, Bangladesh: Pirijipur and Kakonhat, with the aim of promoting integrity to enable better water service for the community.

This project was the first of its kind for DASCOH, which has traditionally been a service delivery organisation. The use of the IMT-SWSS enabled new work for enhancing service delivery systems through accountability and transparency. The project involved collaboration with local government bodies, water committee members, community leaders, and water users.

2 Project Background and Context

Bangladesh is divided into 64 administrative districts (Zilas), each governed by a Deputy Commissioner (DC) responsible for local administration, law and order, and development. Each district has an elected local council, called a Zila parishad, which handles development and infrastructure. In the districts, city corporations and municipalities (Pourashavas) govern the urban areas, while sub-district (Upazila) and union councils (or Union Parishads) oversee rural areas. Upazila and Union Parishads are comprised of directly elected representatives. There are always at least three reserved seats for women on these councils.

Provision of water supply is a municipal function, mandated to Pourashavas in urban areas and devolved to Union Parishads in rural areas, with technical support from the Department of Health and Engineering (DPHE) and other national agencies. In practice in many cases, influential figures in these areas, members of the Union Parishads, or local elites with social, financial or political power control the rural water systems and benefit from them financially. They are often resistant to processes that threaten their control.

There are regular allegations of undue political interference in managing water systems. Cultural and traditional barriers also make it difficult for women to participate in decision-making, and their involvement in rural meetings remains very low. Water quality is a concern, as the logistics to send samples to urban centres for testing are challenging, as are the set-up of regular surveillance, testing, and oversight mechanisms in remote regions.

Overall, there is an absence of dialogue between the committees, users, Union Parishad, and the Department of Public Health and Engineering (DPHE). The national institutions mandated to support small committees (like DPHE) are usually based in urban areas. They have limited reach to support water and sanitation service provision in rural areas and they rarely engage with the Union Parishads, local influencers, or water users. This poses a significant obstacle to achieving adequate service delivery.

In the project area in Godagari, many water users are extremely poor and struggle to pay bills. Payment rates are low, operation and maintenance are inadequate, and there is little transparency on how payments for water services are used.

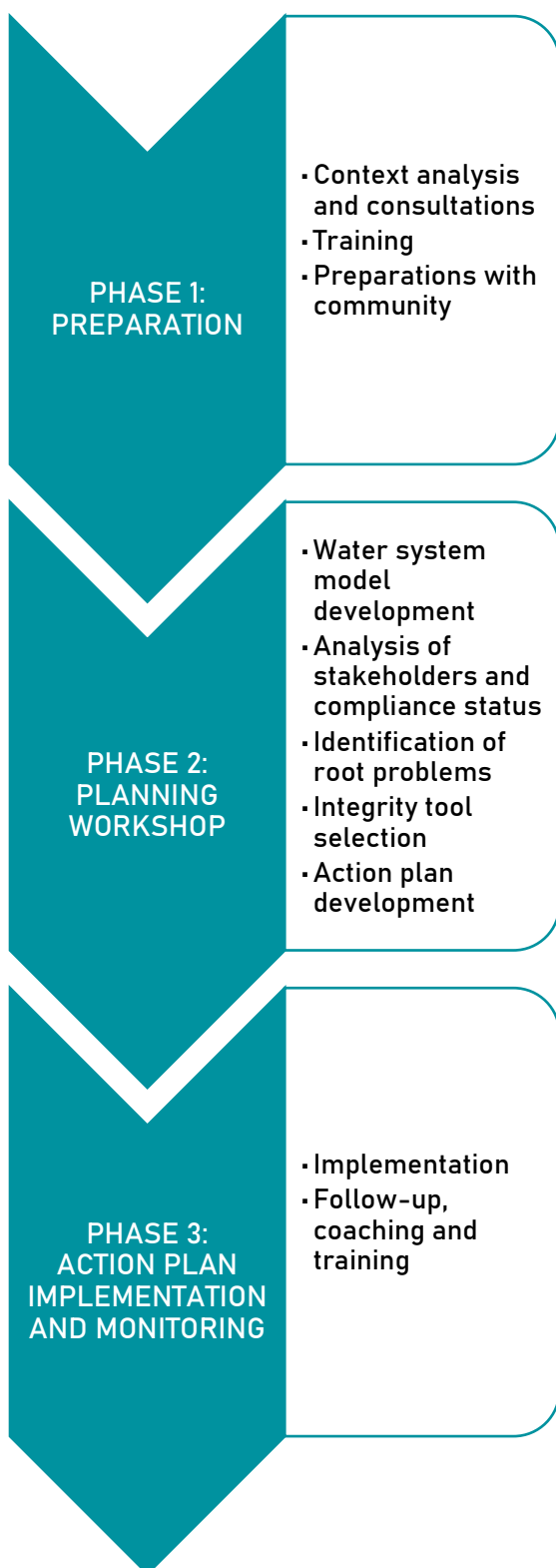
Over the years, DASCOH helped establish water resource management committees in the two schemes to manage the systems. These committees are comprised of elected representatives, community volunteers, and water users. At first these committees did not have any government and local government legal recognition and were operating informally.

It is in this context that DASCOH, supported by WIN, implemented the Integrity Management Toolbox for Small Water Supply Systems (IMT-SWSS). The aim was to address the accountability and governance issues that affect the water management committees and the service delivered to users.



Photo: IMT-SWSS planning workshop in Kakonhat Pourasava, participants studying the water system model and identifying problems (DASCOH)

3 Implementation of the IMT-SWSS



3.1 IMT-SWSS Preparation Phase

The implementation of the tool began with preparatory work including context analysis, stakeholder mapping, and document analysis. These analyses highlighted the influence of certain actors, including government and community leaders, who sometimes played dual roles, both supporting and hindering development depending on the circumstances.

The stakeholder mapping also examined the role of large regional and national sector institutions like the DPHE, the Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA), the Department of Agriculture Extension, the Bangladesh Water Development Board, and the DPHE mechanics, who are meant to support the operation and maintenance system of the schemes.

DASCOH conducted consultations with the municipality, community leaders at the village and Union Parishad levels, water scheme committee members, and local media (the latter being critical stakeholders because of their ability to put pressure on local government). Consultations with the water committees focused on clarifying their composition, financial management, ownership, and operations. During the consultations, DASCOH also worked with the communities to assess their water needs, paying attention specifically to the perspectives of underprivileged groups and of the members of the committees.

Figure: Phases of an IMT-SWSS process

3.2 Planning Workshop Phase



Photo: IMT-SWSS planning workshop in Kakonhat Pourasava: introduction to integrity and integrity problems that can affect service quality (DASCOH)

Water users and committee members, government representatives at the Union Parishad and Pourashava levels, engineers, community leaders and volunteers, and other NGO representatives all participated in the IMT-SWSS planning workshop, with DASCOH as facilitator. The participants first modelled their water system, then analysed stakeholders, identified problems and tools, and finally jointly developed an action plan for governance, management, and integrity.

The communities decided on the direction of their action plan, where to focus their energies, and their priorities, while DASCOH ensured that the discussions still centred on questions of governance and integrity.

“Guiding means yes, we are talking about the water supply, water integrity, water governance, this part.

But how the community will decide what they will do, that fully depends on them. They have to decide where they are not happy, where they want to improve, what they want to do. That is very open.”

–Akramul Haque, CEO, DASCOH Foundation

The workshop participants in Pirijipur identified the following key problems and selected different tools to address them:

Problems identified	Integrity tools selected
The money collected is insufficient for operations and maintenance or for paying staff	Set up a transparent tariff structure Organise regular meetings as a committee Set up a simple bookkeeping system
Some people are unable to pay in full	Raise awareness in the community on their rights and responsibilities Set up regular meetings with customers Discuss and tackle gender issues around WASH with customers
The money collected is not kept safely	Organise a simple bookkeeping training Set up a simple billing system Open a bank account or use mobile banking

The workshop participants in Kakonhat identified the following key problems and selected different tools to address them:

Problems identified	Integrity tools selected
The money collected is insufficient for operations and maintenance or for paying staff	Set up a simple bookkeeping system Install water meters at every water point and individual connection Agree with local government on technical and financial support
Some people refuse to pay	Set up a simple billing system Raise awareness in the community on their rights and responsibilities Improve the water quality at the source
The money collected is not kept safely	Organise a simple bookkeeping training Open a bank account or use mobile banking Organise regular meetings as a committee

To create their final action plan, the committee members with the support of DASCOH, detailed what actions would be taken first, by who, and under what timeline. In addition, the committee clarified what resources would be made available to implement the plan, as well as the role of the various stakeholders involved, particularly local government officials.

4 Implementation and Outcomes

Remarkably, as a result of project preparation and roll out, any water resource management committee can now be formally registered in the area, using any business model. The shift towards recognised community-driven management has reduced the influence of powerful individuals and promoted a more democratic and inclusive approach to service delivery.

Work to implement all of the selected tools in each community has been ongoing for over a year in Godagari, leading to several positive outcomes.

Increased appreciation of integrity practices

The community now actively endorses an integrity-focused process. Early in the process, there was hesitancy about the usefulness of integrity measures. However, consistent communication, regular meetings, and further trainings have demonstrated the tangible benefits of integrity in improving water service quality and transparency. The communities have recognised the importance of trust between service providers and water users, and the important role that integrity practices play in building this trust.

Through the workshops and follow-up activities, the committees have also developed a deeper understanding of how integrity prevents undue influence by powerful individuals, and enhances accountability. Based on the analysis done in the workshop phase, there is also more clarity on what might work best for each community.

Monthly committee meetings now include written resolutions detailing responsibilities and future actions, reinforcing transparency. Moreover, the committees have gone above and beyond the ambitions of their action plan, as they embraced and implemented additional integrity tools like complaint mechanisms.

This transformation has fostered a sense of ownership among community members. They see integrity as a vital practice to ensure quality services and reduce corruption, with many working actively to disseminate the lessons learned during training across the entire community.

Increased willingness to pay for services within the community

The community members have demonstrated an increased willingness to pay for water services, largely driven by transparent financial practices. The committees established a simple bookkeeping and receipt system to document income and expenditures on operation and maintenance. This transparency and clarity on how money is used has built trust.

The community also reached a consensus on increasing the monthly water tariff from 120 to 150 taka to align with rising costs for electricity, repairs, and system maintenance. For those who were already not able to pay, the committee, through consultation, made the decision to allow very poor users to pay the tariff in instalments. These adjustments,

agreed upon collectively, reflect a better understanding of the financial needs of the system.

Increased engagement from local government and WASH sector institutions

One of the benefits of the IMT-SWSS is that it helps to strengthen the link between local stakeholders and government institutions tasked with supporting rural water service. From the beginning of the process, DASCOH worked to involve these institutions and ensure that the committees understand that local government and WASH sector institutions have a responsibility to support them. As a result, engagement from local government and WASH sector institutions has grown substantially, leading to improved collaboration and enhanced support for water services in the two locations.

The regular meetings and reporting practices adopted by the committees have further strengthened these connections. Committees share updates on challenges and opportunities with local government, enabling informed decision-making and support. Communities now receive more frequent and reliable assistance from Department of Public Health and Engineering (DPHE) mechanics, who are actively involved in maintaining and operating water structures. Local governments also better support the communities as they have taken steps to influence and guide DPHE activities, ensuring monthly oversight of water schemes.

A significant milestone has been the inclusion of water supply budgets in the local governments annual development plans. This demonstrates a commitment to sustaining and improving water services. These budgets allocate resources for operations and maintenance and for the establishment of new water schemes.

Elected representatives are now actively participating in committee meetings, addressing both water and sanitation issues as well as broader community concerns. This increased engagement from local authorities has enhanced the overall functionality and sustainability of the water systems, aligning technical and financial support with community priorities.

Greater engagement within the community and greater responsiveness to user needs

Women's participation in the water scheme s decision-making has increased, with elected representatives acknowledging the importance of women's inclusion in such processes for the first time. DASCOH and the communities worked hard to ensure not just a third of positions in committees would be held by women but at least half. This has made a difference for users as well. When users now come to engage with the committees, it is mostly women.

Participants from the follow-up trainings have gained insight into water and sanitation issues, integrity practices, and stakeholder engagement. The additional trainings carried out during implementation of the action plans have focused on increasing the community's understanding of global and local water crises, water policies in Bangladesh, and the roles of municipalities and Union Parishads in the sector. Committee members now also know how to map stakeholders, identify risks and challenges to integrity, and create actionable plans.

Youth groups have also been trained to serve as integrity pressure groups, ensuring that service providers like the committee remain accountable. This comprehensive capacity-

building initiative has strengthened governance systems and empowered the community to advocate for fair and transparent practices.

Committees now take part in “democratic dialogues” with users on a bimonthly basis, or according to demand of communities and with due attention to the schedules that would be convenient for women participating. In these dialogues, users can share feedback on services. In at least one of the dialogues, two of the participants crosschecked the bank book and money receipts (which have been introduced as some of the tools selected via the IMT-SWSS process).

The newly introduced complaint mechanisms have also made a big difference. All users have the mobile phone number of the water management committee. If a problem arises in the supply line, users can now register a complaint. In one democratic dialogue, one committee committed to log and address the complaint within 12 hours.

5 Challenges and Lessons Learned

5.1 Challenges

Following the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government in August 2024, political upheaval has created significant challenges for the project. Many political and administrative positions remain unfilled, making it difficult to liaise with government institutions, as officials are often unavailable. This has hindered communication and collaboration with administrators, complicating efforts to ensure sustainable support for the project. Advocacy with the Upazila DPHE officer to appoint permanent mechanics at the Union Parishad level is ongoing, but dependence on limited government allocations (due to delayed budgets) remains a barrier.

Water quality testing is another critical issue. Although DPHE is responsible for testing, logistical hurdles make it difficult for rural areas to access this service, as samples must be sent to district-level facilities. Initial water quality tests have been conducted, but routine testing remains unfeasible due to these constraints.

Additionally, logistical and financial challenges, such as installing water meters, have proven difficult to address. While these issues are being discussed in training sessions and solutions are being developed, progress is slow due to cost and technical limitations. Greater resource mobilisation and increased allocations coming from government institutions are needed in order to respond to the schemes' current needs. Committees also still rely on DASCOH for support, rather than taking full ownership of their responsibilities.

In Kakonhat, there are challenges in maintaining the relationship with the municipal authorities that some participants see as undue interference. Although IMT-SWSS was supported by the former elected municipal leaders, the interim government has replaced them with temporary non-elected officials who do not support the implementation of tools or changes to tariffs. They are not known or accountable to the community users in terms of regular communication and acceptance of complaints. Efforts to resolve these issues through meetings with the mayor have been delayed by the ongoing political crisis.

Despite efforts and increased participation of women, traditional norms still often prevent women from engaging in meetings or decision-making processes. Participation remains an issue that requires time and sustained commitment from the community and project teams.

5.2 Lessons Learned and Future Direction

While officially the state is responsible for ensuring the supply of safe drinking water in rural areas, due to limited resources and capacity, informal systems still exist. The absence of formal water supply systems in rural areas poses a significant challenge, highlighting the need to adapt strategies to work hand in hand with Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE), Union Parishads, and NGOs to improve transparency and accountability.

The project has provided valuable insights into strengthening water and sanitation services in rural areas of Bangladesh. A critical lesson learned is the importance of engaging all relevant stakeholders, including local government bodies and NGOs, from the outset. This ensures their support and alignment with project goals. There is a major opportunity for organisations implementing the IMT-SWSS to develop formal partnerships and agreements with local government bodies prior to implementation. The importance of addressing cultural and traditional barriers, particularly those related to gender, is a critical factor for the success of such initiatives. Flexibility in implementing solutions, particularly tools like water meters, is critical, as financial and logistical constraints can limit their feasibility in certain contexts.

It was reaffirmed through the process that rural communities often lack knowledge about service providers and their responsibilities, emphasising the need for continuous community education to foster trust and understanding. Further, there is work to be done to help communities assess and address the ways in which corruption affects their access to water services. Public hearings, citizen charters, and complaint mechanisms were identified as essential tools to enhance transparency and accountability in service delivery. The democratic dialogues carried out in Godagari are a major milestone in this direction.



Photo: IMT-SWSS planning workshop in Pirijpur drinking water supply scheme discussing the action plan (DASCOH)