

Our opportunity for collective action

Transforming factory worker communities in and around Chattogram, Bangladesh

WSUP | Water & Sanitation
for the Urban Poor

Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor

WSUP is a world leader in WASH in low-income urban communities. We build services which are affordable, financially viable, and sustainable by:

- Partnering with local utilities or authorities responsible for delivering WASH services
- Extending networks to last mile connections
- Helping reduce systemic water losses – up to 50% of water is lost from networks
- Supporting private enterprise to fill gap in services
- Working with the community to design services and ensure ownership & maintenance of facilities
- Prioritising the most vulnerable, including women and girls.

We opened our first Bangladesh office in 2008, and are now in Dhaka, Chattogram, Cumilla and Tongi in Gazipur. Our national team of experts are trusted partners of water utilities, and local and national government departments such as Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE).



Women factory workers in their community

Bangladesh – WASH ambitions but still a long way to go



Approximately 45% of city dwellers in Bangladesh lack affordable, safe water or decent sanitation, despite investment in large-scale infrastructure.

This impacts low-income communities where the unplanned nature of the housing and cramped environments pose a significant challenge to installing pipes or sewers.

These challenges are amplified in Chattogram, where water has high concentrations of salt, iron and arsenic and contaminants including E coli.

Around 9 million people live in Chattogram City and surrounding districts where there are large numbers of factories in Export Processing Zones (EPZs).

Most of these factory workers live in low-income communities with little to no access to safe water and sanitation.



Joining up to reach the last mile

Chattogram is benefitting from various large scale development projects funded by international institutions like World Bank and the Japan International Cooperation Agency, in support of the government's WASH improvement goals.

These projects include major infrastructure such as sewage treatment plants and water and groundwater treatment plants and 200km of new sewage piping.

They will considerably strengthen Chattogram city's ability to deal with its waste and provide fresh water.

However, these huge investments will not benefit many worker communities as the networks are not planned to cover last-mile connections.

This collective action project will help bridge the gap for those worker communities and make sure that they are not left behind.



Sewers being installed adjacent to the low-income worker communities



Chattogram – a typical inner-city low-income worker housing area

WASH needs of workers and their families

Around 4 million people live in factory worker communities in and around Chattogram, with few resources:

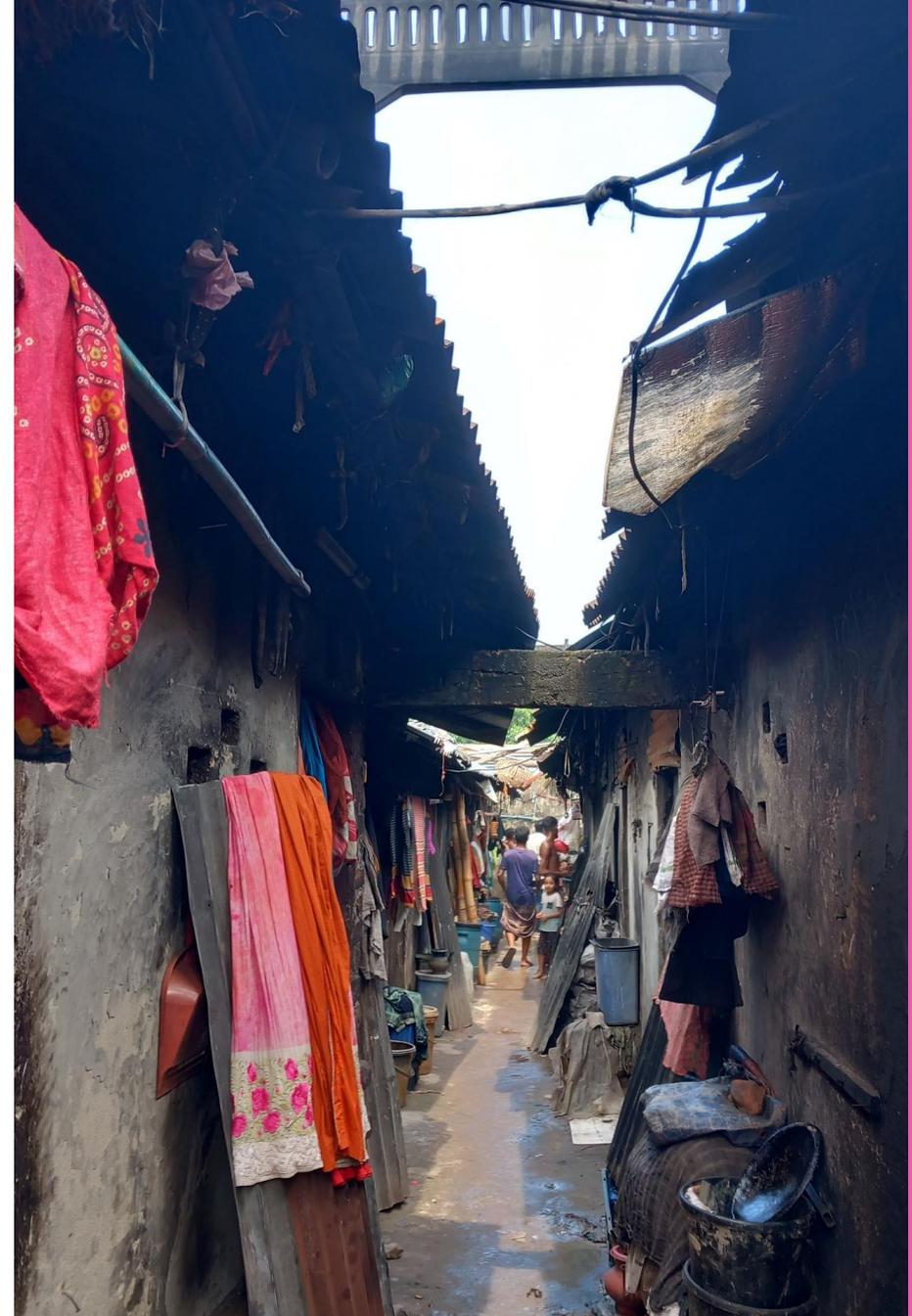
Water points are shared, there are few of them and they often have unreliable supply. This means tough choices for women fetching water for the home:

- queue and be late to work and lose pay;
- pay high prices to a vendor for water of unknown quality and safety;
- use unofficial boreholes where the water is untreated and has high levels of contamination

Sanitation is always shared and often rudimentary. Pit latrines easily leak or overflow. All of this leads to environmental contamination.

There are **few handwashing facilities**, increasing risk of contaminating household drinking water.

Solid waste is not disposed of properly



A typical factory worker community in Chattogram city

The story so far

WSUP are experts in addressing these challenges and since 2019 have been working in factory worker communities in Chattogram. We first supported by VF Corporation, and since 2023 with The Coca-Cola Foundation too.

With these partners, we have provided

- **toilet blocks** – raised out of flood waters, with lights and locks
- **washbasins** for every toilet block
- **women-only bathing chambers** – with lights and locks
- **metered water points** connected to the utility's safe water supply
- a **low-income community specialist unit** within the city utility (CWASA) to support them to overcome the challenges of getting services to these communities



Life for worker communities before WSUP interventions

Above: buying water from a private vendor. This is expensive and there is no guarantee the water is safe to drink.

Below: the grim reality of toilets in a worker community



Delivering real change

This work has provided:

- **108,000 people** with safe sanitation
- **30,000** with access to clean water
- **132,000** with information on water stewardship
- **11,000** with information and education on menstrual health and hygiene management
- **58,000** with training on operation and maintenance of the new facilities
- Better understanding of the needs of low-income communities and how to serve them



Above: Menstrual health and hygiene management sessions for young women in the community, delivered by WSUP
Below: a new toilet block installed by WSUP, raised out of flood waters, with male and female chambers, doors that lock, lights and a water source for cleaning and flushing



Don't just take our word for it...

The communities have told us:

- they now have better, safer, *cheaper* water – typically a family would spend BDT 700-1000 a month on buying water from a private vendor. Now their CWASA water bill is BDT 200 a month
- the women and girls no longer have to walk long distances to find somewhere safe to wash or use the toilet, making them late for work or school
- women and adolescent girls are no longer getting skin rashes from washing their clothes and reusable sanitary pads in contaminated water
- families are feeling healthier and wealthier as their health improves, they get sick less often and can earn more



Members of the community with their new, metered safe water supply. Behind them, information on good water practices



Left to right: Informal water vendor in Chattogram; sponge used to absorb excess iron from boreholes; water from CWASA and from borehole



New water points in the factory worker communities, with information at the water point including on water stewardship and how to prevent contamination



Information leaflets available at local stores, including on how to reach the utility

Collective action – transforming millions more lives



With the WASH4Work collective action we aim to build on our achievements to reach **2 million people in factory worker communities** in and around Chattogram, amplifying impact and delivering sustainable and climate resilient services.

We will do this through providing:

- **New safe, clean water points** – extending CWASA’s network and providing new deep tubewells where needed
- **New sanitation facilities** – male and female toilet blocks, with lights, locks, bins and handwashing facilities
- **New bathing facilities** – female-only shower rooms with lights and locks
- **Information and education** on hygiene including water stewardship, menstrual health management delivered in the community, schools and through places of worship, to drive health improvements and reduce water wastage
- **Sanitation services** – working with the City Corporation and authorities, and linking communities to affordable pit emptying services so they can make sure their toilet pits don’t block or overflow
- **Solid waste management**– education and information for the community so they can responsibly dispose of their solid waste, preventing environmental damage, blocked latrines or contamination of water sources (new under this initiative)
- **More support to CWASA, Chattogram City Corporation and the authorities around the EPZs**, so they can better serve factory worker communities

Building in climate resilience

Recognizing that Chattogram and surrounding areas are prone to increasingly severe storms flooding and that clean, safe water is a precious resource, we ensure that new facilities are climate resilient and provide education on this topic. This includes:

- Raising water points and toilet blocks out of flood levels and ensuring toilet pits are properly lined, sealed and cannot overflow.
- Educating communities on proper water usage and storage, to reduce water wastage and unnecessary contamination.
- Linking communities to pit emptying services to ensure human waste is safely removed and treated and does not enter the environment or contaminate water sources.
- Linking communities to waste collection services to reduce disposal of waste in drainage networks, which causes flooding.
- Introducing rainwater harvesting systems and developing salinity-resistant wells.



Toilet blocks are raised up out of flood levels, including their tanks to prevent them overflowing

With the community, for the community, for sustainability

Engaging the community in the key decisions increases their ownership of the new facilities and services, so they take better care of them. We do this through:

- Consulting with them on where they want the new water points or toilet blocks
- Hiring them to help construct the new water network or toilet blocks
- Training them on operation and maintenance so they know how to keep their new taps and toilets clean and functional
- Training them on testing the water in their storage tanks to ensure water quality
- Making sure they understand their rights as customers and know how to contact the utility to ensure those rights are recognized and respected



Community engagement sessions



Tailoring within collective action

WSUP works in low-income communities in response to their specific situation

- Is there water? Where is it coming from? How is it stored? How far is the network? Is the network accessible or are deep tube-wells a better option?
- What is the sanitation situation? How many people are sharing a toilet? Where does it drain into? How is it emptied? How does the community manage solid waste?
- Are there WASH facilities in the local schools? What is the level of understanding of hygiene, menstrual health management?

These questions allow us to design projects that respond to the specific needs of each community.

This means we have the flexibility to apply these same tailored approaches within this collective action to suit the interests and budget envelopes of interested partners.



In their own words: what this work means to The Coca-Cola Foundation and VF Corporation



The Coca-Cola Foundation's giving strategy prioritizes water-stressed and vulnerable communities, helping to ensure reliable access to safe drinking water. Since 2022, the Foundation has financially supported WSUP's program in Chattogram, Bangladesh, addressing challenges in water supply, reliability, and climate resilience for low-income urban areas.

The program has enhanced water access, built local capacity for ongoing water service delivery, and improved non-revenue water management. The Coca-Cola Foundation is grateful for its collaboration with WSUP and looks forward to scaling this work in the future.

Carlos Pagoaga, President of The Coca-Cola Foundation

At VF Corporation, we are dedicated to improving the lives of workers within our supply chain and positively transforming surrounding communities. Through our long-standing partnership with WSUP in Bangladesh, we have significantly improved access to clean water and sanitation in the neighborhoods where factory workers and their families live.

These improvements, especially in drinking water, toilet and bathing facilities, have had a profound impact on daily life, particularly for women and girls, while also reducing absenteeism, improving productivity, and boosting overall well-being in factories. WSUP's approach is cost-effective, climate-resilient and deeply adapted to community needs, both now and for the future. We invite other corporate partners to join us in scaling this initiative through collective action.

Jens Aas, Senior Manager Worker & Community Development, VF Corporation



Come and join our collective action
Thank you.

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