



# Mobilizing Self-Help Groups to Manage Faecal Sludge in Pithampur, Madhya Pradesh, India

## SUMMARY

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM - Clean India Mission), launched in 2014, witnessed a quantum leap across the country on access to and use of toilets. The push was primarily for onsite sanitation systems such as pit and septic tank latrines. However, as the momentum for onsite sanitation grew, major gaps in the implementation of the sanitation services chain, leading to the unsafe disposal of faecal sludge, were identified. To address these issues, a pilot Faecal Sludge and Septage Management (FSSM) programme, supported by UNICEF and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), is implemented in 4 Indian states. The overall goal of the project is to provide support to the Urban Administration and Development Departments (UADD) at the state level and two urban local bodies in each state in planning, managing, and providing technological interventions for FSSM services, and integrating social and behaviour change to strengthen the overall value chain for FSSM. The implementation revealed that the role of behaviour change communication especially interpersonal communication (IPC) is critical for effective and sustained change among the communities and self-help groups<sup>1</sup> (SHGs) are instrumental in mobilizing and engaging communities ensuring safe sanitation and proper disposal of faecal sludge. This WASH Diary showcases a conversation with Rashami Rajput, an active SHG and Mohalla Samiti (neighbourhood community) member, bringing to light the voices from the field on how effective community mobilization and behaviour change communication has positively impacted FSSM in Pithampur.

## Background

Pithampur is a town located in the Dhar district of the central state of India; Madhya Pradesh, which falls within the suburban limits of the Indore Metropolitan Region and is the largest industrial node within the state. Its elevation variations are modest within 10 miles of the town (i.e., 1,204 feet), whilst within 50 miles the variation in

elevation becomes significant, reaching up to 2,441 feet, providing challenging conditions for sewered sanitation. The area within 2 miles of Pithampur is covered by cropland (65 per cent) and grassland (11 per cent). As per Census 2011, Pithampur town has a population of 126,200 residing in 31,136 households (HH), many of them migrant workers. A baseline study of 831 households (2.7 per cent of total HH) conducted

<sup>1</sup> SHG is an alliance of about 10 to 20 people living in the same society which is formed for any economic or social benefit purpose. Generally, self-help groups are formed to provide financial help to each other in a group.

for the FSSM initiative revealed that 95 per cent of HH had access to operational toilets. However, the town of Pithampur faced severe challenges of indiscriminate disposal of partially treated wastewater, discharged into drains and water bodies, significantly polluting the environment. Dried sludge (partially treated) could be seen out in the open. The lack of appropriate faecal sludge treatment technology resulted in large excreta containment units, which conflicted with the norms of IS 2470<sup>2</sup>. Community toilet (CT) users were unaware of desludging and 44 per cent of the CTs were yet to be desludged, posing great risks of water contamination.

Key findings of the FSSM Baseline 2021 also highlighted:

- 78 per cent of the total sludge was safely contained, but was due to be emptied, while 22 per cent of the effluent was discharged in the open
- 5.05 per cent of HHs do not have toilets and 1.32 per cent have reported to defecate in the open. 3.89 per cent of HH identified as low-income bracket HH
- 43.22 per cent of HHs have containment systems that range from a minimum of 8 m<sup>3</sup> to as high as 25 m<sup>3</sup>
- 84.6 per cent HHs mentioned they are not ready to pay a fee for desludging
- It was evident during the field surveys that most HH do not know the current policies and norms relevant to sanitation planning, like desludging.

## FSSM in Pithampur

The project has witnessed a creditable change after the engagement and mobilization of women in the Urban Local Body (ULB). This can be attributed to the effective social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) strategy developed and implemented in the ULB. A scientific approach was adopted for devising a

<sup>2</sup> Indian Standard Code of Practice for installation of septic tanks (IS:2470): IS Code provides various requirements that

localized behaviour change communication strategy for Pithampur, based on evidence generated from the field. First the team initiated a desk review for an overview sanitation situation assessment for the town of Pithampur. It identified key behaviours to be prioritized for different stakeholders, and communication channels that could be used to reach them.

The key behaviours that were prioritized in the SBCC strategy are:

- Desludging of septic tanks through desludging operators at a regular interval of 3 years or earlier if required.
- ULB to ensure that the containment tanks are designed as per government guidelines.
- Use of safety gear and personal protective equipment (PPE) by the desludging/FSTP operators.

Key steps to develop the localized SBCC strategy were:

- In-depth interviews and group discussions to identify key stakeholders
- Identification of current practices and barriers of the stakeholders
- Identification of communication channels and tools to reach key audiences
- Development of a communication plan matrix targeting existing behaviours to be changed.

**Picture 1: Triggering of SHGs**



have to be met while constructing a septic tank so that it meets minimum standards.

The situation analysis highlighted the possibility of engaging SHG members, Mohalla (community) samiti (society) members and students were identified as motivators at the HH level, and trade associations as motivators for mobilizing commercial establishments. Along with identifying key motivators, a channel analysis was undertaken which identified the key audiences and multiple channels through which various audiences could be mobilized including print media, mid-media<sup>3</sup> hoardings, radio jingles, interactive community theatre, audio-video materials, and social media.

## Story

### Mobilizing SHGs: Voice from the field

In a candid conversation with Rashmi Rajput, an active SHG member and an existing Mohalla Samiti member, this diary captures her experience as a community mobilizer and a champion SHG member to mobilize communities in implementing FSSM in Pithampur. Her answers were translated and summarized to English.

### Picture 2: Mamta Rathore, member of SHG committee



According to Mamta Rathor, who is a member of the SHG committee and elected president of local group 'Hareka Sahara'<sup>4</sup>, "Rashmi is an extremely dedicated and motivated member of the group. She has been leading the drive

from the front and sensitizing people about the importance of safe sanitation and regular emptying of pits".

<sup>3</sup> Mid media is the use of local, sometimes traditional, form of communication such as puppet shows, magic shows, drama, and street theatre to deliver messages to a community.

### Tell us about yourself – your background and your family?

I am a member of the SHG for the past two years and a member of the Mohalla Samiti. I also work as a volunteer to generate awareness about water, sanitation, and hygiene issues. We are not from this place but have migrated to Pithampur as my husband is working here. We are staying as tenants.

### Do all the households in your Mohalla have toilet facilities? Where do people go to defecate?

Almost all the houses have toilets and people use these. Earlier, there were some cases of open defecation because this being an industrial area, many migrants stay here. There are community toilets (CT) too, so some people who do not have access to household toilets use CTs.

### Do you know what happens to excreta and water once it is flushed down after toilet use?

Yes, now I know. Earlier no one bothered to know what happened to the excreta after flushing. We always thought that having a toilet with a big tank was enough. But now things have changed. We know that owning a toilet and using it is not enough. We must ensure that the excreta collected in these tanks must be safely managed and disposed of. Just flushing the excreta is not enough.

### Do you know how excreta are stored, collected, transported, and treated?

### Picture 3: Rashmi Rajput, Mohalla Samiti member



Yes, again now we are aware of it. Earlier we were not aware of the whole process. Now we know that the excreta are safely stored in our toilets AND every 3 years we need to call the toll-free number to get our tanks

<sup>4</sup> A locally formed citizen's group in Pitampur which aimed to manage and monitor sanitation situation in the ward.

emptied. The tanks are being emptied using desludging vehicles and trained staff members. The team needs to use PPE during emptying. Thereafter the sludge is treated in the treatment plant and the treated water is re-used for gardening. The dry sludge is used as fertilizer through co-composting.

**Are there any challenges faced by the citizens in desludging their septic tanks? What are they?**

Most of the residents of the town own a toilet but maintaining them was not a priority. Earlier the tanks were emptied only when they got blocked. Most of the tanks overflowed and the wastewater entered the stormwater drains causing a stench and a filthy situation. The households did not possess any knowledge about wastewater contaminating the area and even the drinking water sources.

**Do you feel the situation has changed in the past 2 years? How did the Mohalla Samiti members resolve those issues/challenges?**

Yes, there has been a real change. Previously, the Samiti members were not aware of the issues, and no one came together to deal with the pollution. Even the ULB could not provide an immediate solution to overflowing tanks which led to a lot of scepticism. However, after the Mohalla Samiti members worked with UNICEF and the WaterAid team along with ULB officials, we are now aware of the harm that overflowing tanks and unsafe disposal of faecal matter can cause and are motivated to solve the issue.

**Picture 4: Mohalla Samiti Meeting**



**What motivated you to join the FSSM project? How were you informed about the process and importance of FSSM?**

When we heard the project team talking about how our ignorance was affecting our health, especially our children's health, it motivated us to make FSSM a priority. Also, previously our community was very dirty, and we could see faecal matter flowing in our stormwater drains, the sight was very unpleasant and disgusting. After the team met with us, we were determined to change the situation and take matters into our own hands.

**Are there any promotional activities conducted in the community regarding desludging septic tanks? What are they and how effective have they been?**

Yes, there were a lot of promotional activities conducted for creating awareness. There were door-door campaigns, community meetings, rallies etc. A lot of awareness was generated by sharing materials like posters, brochures, and leaflets. Very catchy jingles were used by the waste collection vehicles, which drew our attention to FSSM. We saw the demon mascot 'Malasur' visiting our houses to motivate us to empty our toilets at least once every 3 years.

**Picture 5: Glimpse of the demon mascot Malasur visiting houses in Pithampur town**



**Who conducted these activities? What were the key messages?**

These activities were carried out by the members of the UNICEF and WaterAid teams. The key messages were as follows:

- Empty the toilet pits minimum every 3 years
- Water gets contaminated due to the faecal sludge running through drains
- Call “14420” helpline number, use the QR code or the [www.fssmpithampur.in](http://www.fssmpithampur.in) portal to request desludging and lodge complaints
- PPE kits to be used by sanitation workers during the desludging of septic tanks

### **How did you take forward the FSSM project in your Mohalla after these activities?**

We went door-to-door in the neighbourhood to sensitize people on the importance of safe sanitation, including having proper toilets, regularly emptying septic tanks, and handwashing. With the help of WaterAid, we garnered cordial relationships with the municipality officials in charge of sanitation and formed a WhatsApp group to share grievances, like- garbage vehicles not coming on time or clogged roads and demand for desludging with local officials. The officials now respond to these grievances swiftly and resolve issues reported. Apart from this, the ULB team has also linked us with the urban livelihoods programme and our group received a loan to carry out various livelihood activities. All of us are now motivated and receiving support from the ULB to carry forward the programme.

### **What are the roles and responsibilities of Mohalla Samiti Members?**

The Mohalla Samitis formed under the project are actively engaged in generating awareness about the routine cleaning of septic tanks, hand washing with soap, segregation of waste and motivating households to upgrade their toilets.

### **What kind of training did you receive to take the implementation of FSSM forward?**

After attending a training programme on safe sanitation for SHGs in Pithampur, I was inspired

to participate in more trainings and meetings. I have received training on the sanitation value chain and desludging process, handwashing with soap and similar. I use the lessons from these trainings to further mobilize and create awareness in my community.

### **What were the main challenges that you faced during the mobilization of the communities?**

The first key challenge is a lack of awareness about the importance of desludging and adopting the right technology. Even masons were not aware of safe toilet construction and built big containment tanks for HHs belonging to below poverty line communities and a few above the poverty line. Secondly that some HH are not ready to carry the costs of retrofitting toilets and desludging septic tanks.

### **Apart from Mohalla Samiti members who else was engaged in the process?**

There were and still are many partners engaged in the process and this has resulted in positive outcomes. We have been getting constant and continuous support from the municipality and technical teams of UNICEF and WaterAid.

### **Are there any other hygiene promotion activities carried out by the Mohalla Samiti? If yes, what are they and how effective they have been?**

Yes, there are many hygiene promotion activities carried out by the Mohalla Samiti. We have meetings and we go to residents' houses to share information and messages. We were involved in distributing SATO Taps, a portable handwashing device that doesn't need access to running water. In case HHs face any problem, the Mohalla Samiti tries to find a solution to resolve it. The Mohalla Samiti is actively engaged in finding solutions for the routine cleaning of septic tanks, hand washing with soap, segregation of waste etc.

### **How aware are community members now of the need for scheduled desludging of septic tanks?**

Everyone in the Mohalla is aware of the importance of desludging septic tanks in a timely fashion. In fact, by seeing the increase in demand

for the cleaning of septic tanks the ULB has retrofitted the existing faecal sludge treatment plant in the ULB. UNICEF and WaterAid provided technical support and supervision during the retrofitting work.

**Are community members ready to pay for the scheduled desludging of their tanks? What is the approximate cost?**

Some of the households were initially hesitant to pay for the desludging of their tanks but after continuous sensitization by our team, they are now ready to pay. The cost differs as per the size of the tanker that is used for desludging, for a 3,000-liter tanker the cost is Rs 1,175/- per trip and for a 4,000-liter tanker the cost is 1,750/- per trip. The smaller tanker is used in the case of smaller septic tanks or if the septic tank is cleaned more regularly.

**Can all families afford the desludging cost? If not, does the Mohalla Samiti have plans to support them?**

The Mohalla Samiti is working on creating bulk desludging demands. As per ULB announcement, if the Mohalla Samiti can generate requests from 10 HHs then all are eligible for an additional 20 per cent discount. This helps poor families specifically.

**Do desludging operators use PPE kits and protective gear during the desludging of septic tanks? What are your suggestions to protect operators from risks related to desludging?**

Initially, desludging operators were not wearing PPE due to unavailability of kits. Narrow lanes and streets posed issues of accessibility for desludging by vacuum machines. But now the desludging operators are wearing PPE. My suggestion to operators is that safety and health are paramount and should not be taken lightly. They should always follow the standard operating procedures for the cleaning of septic tanks and sewers that are circulated by the state government.

**How will you ensure FSSM in your area continues if there is no support from any agency?**

We have understood the importance of safe management of faecal sludge, so I will continue working with my Mohalla Samiti members to sensitize HHs to empty their septic tanks every 3 years. I will also continue to create awareness about hand washing with soap and personal hygiene whenever I can.

**How does the Mohalla Samiti involve youth and marginalized groups in the decision-making process regarding FSSM?**

The Mohalla Samiti is working with local youth and marginalized groups to gain a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social, and economic factors that affect their FSSM practices. Youth and marginalized groups play a vital role in raising awareness and advocating for change among their peers, setting new standards for the future. Their knowledge also helps to inform the overall project team to design interventions that are appropriate for youths living in the area.

**What did you personally learn from the project?**

Being a part of the samiti has been very empowering personally. My personal key takeaway is that when the community comes together anything is possible. Earlier, people would not listen to what we had to say, but when we go as a team everyone listens to us.

**What is the biggest success in your eyes, in this project? Or how do you evaluate the project?**

There has been an increase in HHs knowledge on desludging needs. There is also a visible increase in the number of HHs properly maintaining and desludging their septic tanks. Yes, there have been positive changes, but still, a lot needs to be done. True success would be when the community takes it on itself to ensure that they adopt safe sanitation practices and disposal.

**Are there any plans or initiatives in place to address the FSSM needs of the city in the future?**

Being an industrial town, the population of the city is growing rapidly, and most of new arrivals are migrant labourers. We have heard that to cater to the entire population of the city the ULB team is planning to construct a new faecal sludge treatment plant for which the site has already been identified and work will start soon.

## Conclusion

Mobilizing the women led SHGs to manage faecal sludge and septage in the small town of Pithampura has been key to the success of the programme. The SHGs deep understanding of the local context, including cultural practices, social norms, and specific challenges related to FSM has proven to be invaluable in designing effective and culturally appropriate communication solutions. The groups relevance in the community makes them instrumental actors in mobilizing HHs and undertaking behaviour change interventions.

### BOX 1

#### KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- *Community leaders, such as SHG members, emerging naturally as change makers make believable and therefore effective role models.*
- *Systematic capacity building of CBOs and FLW on social and behaviour change approaches is critical for communicating and engaging with a community.*
- *Strengthening of community-based organizations like women SHGs leads to sustained change.*
- *Behaviour change interventions need to be contextualized locally, needing a solid situation analysis along with community feedback as evidence for the development of targeted SBCC interventions.*
- *To ensure sustainable sanitation market development and sustained behavioral changes, it is critical to foster supply and demand in parallel.*

Their interpersonal communication with community members using local language, local symbols, and local channels of communication effectively created real change in the community adopting proper sanitation and hygiene practices. The groups have proven to be highly effective and are crucial in monitoring the progress on the ground.

Moreover, the women have played a significant role in adopting a gender-transformative approach to fostering community ownership. Training has enhanced their capacities to promote behaviour change and ensure sustainability by tailoring solutions to the specific needs of the area. They can identify challenges and successes and provide timely feedback to the ULB and programme team, enabling them to make informed decisions and adjustments. The SHGs facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices between different communities, enabling learning from successful sanitation initiatives and avoiding repeating past mistakes in other areas. This model provides a robust mechanism for scaling up community-level action for City-Wide Inclusive sanitation (CWIS) and the overall shift to safely managed sanitation in the State.

## Acknowledgements

UNICEF New Delhi and Madhya Pradesh would like to acknowledge the leadership of the Pithampur ULB team and the Mohalla Samiti in Pithampur; Tokeer Ahamad (WaterAid), Pranshu Kumar (WaterAid), Balwan Singh Mardaniya (WaterAid) and the members of the Mohalla samiti. UNICEF India would also like to acknowledge the partnership with the Urban Administrative and Development Department (UADD) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on urban FSSM.

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## Photo Credits

Balwan Singh (WaterAid)

## About the Authors

The paper has been developed with a joint effort of the UNICEF staff in Madhya Pradesh office and Delhi. Credits go to Pankaj Mathur (WASH specialist), Goutam Mahato (IEC, CB, and KM Expert), Shalini Prasad (SBC Specialist, ICO), Bhavna Thakur (SBC consultant, ICO). The paper has been reviewed by Sujoy Mojumdar (Senior Sanitation Specialist) from UNICEF India and Nicole Klaesener-Metzner, UNICEF ROSA.



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United Nations Children's Fund  
3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, USA

For more information, please contact: [WASH@unicef.org](mailto:WASH@unicef.org)