



A crisis in governance: Urban solid waste management in Bangladesh

Shahjahan H. Bhuiyan*

Department of Public Administration, Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics, and Strategic Research (KIMEP), 4 Abai Avenue, Almaty 050010, Kazakhstan

A B S T R A C T

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This paper analyzes and reviews the role of governance in solid waste management as administered by the city governments in Bangladesh. An attempt has been made to examine how and to what extent operational problems impede delivery of conservancy services to urban dwellers. The study is primarily based on empirical data gathered in the years 2000, 2003 and 2009. The data document the lack of good governance which has a negative effect on the performance of a conservancy department. As a result, the department delivers inadequate and unsatisfactory services, thus rendering city governments vulnerable to citizens' complaints. A direct consequence of the poor performance of the conservancy department is the growth of community-based initiatives, private and non-government organizations, which are increasingly playing an important role in delivering conservancy services. In the light of its findings, the paper argues that city government, instead of showing indifference to private and community initiatives that have succeeded in reaching the service users, should share the service delivery responsibility with them. The results suggest that a well-built public–private partnership can ensure effective solid waste management and thus good urban governance in Bangladesh. The key lessons learned are: a number of challenges that stem from the lack of good governance thwarted an effective solid waste management; formation of public–private partnership was possible in a politically divided society; and, partnership emerged as an instrument for better service delivery.

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Introduction

Cities in developing countries are confronting a twin dilemma. On one hand, the urban population is growing rapidly, causing a huge increase in demand for waste management services. On the other, the traditional public sector is responding poorly to the growing demand for such services (Ahmed & Ali, 2006). The issue of poor solid waste management (SWM) has become a challenge for governments of developing Asia and Africa (Calò & Parise, 2009; Halla & Majani, 2003; Mwangi, 2000; Ogu, 2000; Zia & Devadas, 2008) because it is critical to the protection of public health, safety and the environment. In developing countries it is also a key source of livelihood and social capital, particularly for the urban poor. Piles of waste left uncollected in the streets, blocking drainage channels or dumped in watercourses, are a major cause of public health risk, and uncontrolled disposal of waste can threaten water resources and place significant environmental health risks on those living nearby. Occupational health and safety risk to solid waste workers and waste pickers is also a major concern (Whiteman, Smith, & Wilson, 2002). Thus, solid waste needs to be managed in a way that

reduces risks to the environment and to human health, which has implications for its storage, collection and proper disposal (Kassim & Ali, 2006). As a result, research on urban SWM in developing countries has developed from concerns such as public sector reform (particularly privatization) and about sustainable development in the urban context (Baud, Grafakos, Hordijk, & Post, 2001). The former is closely connected to the neo-liberal doctrine proclaiming a resurgence of the market and a reduction of state provision and even control, while the latter is focused on private sector involvement in service provision. This raises issues of public interest and acceptability (Baud et al., 2001). It has been recognized that one of the classical tasks of public administration is still to provide conservancy services to citizens. In an increasingly turbulent politico-administrative environment, public administration has been experiencing a bumpy journey, as its tasks seem overwhelming and beyond human capacity to perform satisfactorily: preventing war and reinforcing the peace; preventing governments decimating their own residents; combating international and internal terrorism; reducing worldwide poverty and human suffering; alleviating natural and manmade disasters; and heading off crises before they get out of hand (Caiden, 2007). Bangladesh public administration has confronted these challenging tasks, but the 'effectiveness' and 'quality' of its public services cannot be guaranteed without good governance. One such task that has an

* Tel.: +7 727 2704266; fax: +7 727 2704344.
E-mail address: sbhuiyan_68@yahoo.com

effect on urban dwellers is poor collection and disposal of solid waste. The effectiveness of SWM in a city is one of the indices for assessing good governance (cited in Nzeadibe, 2009:93; also see Rouse, 2006).

The production of urban solid waste is gradually increasing in Bangladesh. In 1995 urban Bangladesh generated 0.49 kg/person/day waste which is estimated to increase to 0.6 kg by 2025 (Ray, 2008: 5). The potential reason of this is rapid and high growth of urban population. For example, in 1999, 30 million people, around 20% of the total population of Bangladesh, lived in urban areas; by 2015 it is estimated that 68 million, more than a third of total population, will be living in urban areas (Pryer, 2003: 9). Table 1 shows a relationship between per capita GDP, population and waste generation in urban Bangladesh. The table demonstrates that per capita income generation improves the purchasing power capacity of citizens, which accelerates the growth of solid waste production.

This trend of urban population growth has outstripped the capacity of city governments to provide effective and efficient delivery of conservancy services. As a result, nearly 50% of the daily generated garbage remains uncollected in the cities¹ of Bangladesh (Bhuiyan, 2005). A 'gap' exists between the daily generation and collection of solid waste, which leaves urban administration vulnerable to citizens' complaints. Available studies (for example, Ahmed & Ali, 2006; Asaduzzaman & Hye, 1998; Bhuiyan, 2004, 2001; Hasan, 1998; Sujauddin, Huda, & Hoque, 2008) show that, in spite of utilizing public resources, the city governments have apparently failed to provide satisfactory conservancy services to users. Had this been because of resource problems or technical difficulties alone, their solution would have been easier. Evidence suggests that this is not the case. It is in this context that this study attempts to examine whether poor conservancy service delivery stems from a governance crisis in Bangladesh. Thus, this paper: (i) describes conservancy service delivery in two cities, Dhaka and Chittagong; (ii) analyzes operational challenges that impede service provision; and (iii) discusses the effectiveness of public-private partnerships for service delivery and shed light on how such partnerships contribute to the meaningful urban governance in Bangladesh. In sum, the main objective of this paper is to analyze the performance of governance in SWM achieved by the city governments in Bangladesh. The scholarship available on the role of good governance in conservancy service delivery in the context of Bangladesh is far from adequate. It is expected that this in-depth study will fill a research gap now existing in this pressing issue of global importance.

Methodology and fieldwork

This paper is based on primary data collected in June and July, 2000, and has since been updated in June 2003 and February 2009. The study was conducted in two major city corporations of Bangladesh: Dhaka, the capital city, and Chittagong, the commercial capital of the country. There are 41 wards² in Chittagong City Corporation (hereinafter called Chittagong) and 90 wards in Dhaka City Corporation (hereinafter called Dhaka). Of these, 3 wards from these two corporations, that is, 2 wards: Jalalabad and Jamal Khan from Chittagong and one ward, Kalabagan, from Dhaka have been selected for this study. Two types of ward, e.g., (i) conservancy and (ii) non-conservancy exist in Chittagong. There are 24 conservancy wards, which receive regular conservancy services. On the other hand, 17 non-conservancy wards receive less frequent and irregular

Table 1

Relationship between per capita GDP, urban population and waste generation.

Year	Urban population	Total urban waste generation (ton/day)	Per capita waste generation rate in urban areas (kg/cap/day)	Per capita GDP
1991	20.8 million	6493	0.31	US\$ 220
2005	32.76 million	13,330	0.41	US\$ 482
2025	78.44 million	47,000	0.60	–

Source: Enayetullah & Hashimi, 2006.

service. The latter emerge due to the corporation's lack of capacity to provide equal service to all (Chittagong City Corporation, 2007). In order to make this study representative, one ward from each category has been selected. Jalalabad represents as non-conservancy and Jamal Khan as conservancy ward. Unlike Chittagong, there is no non-conservancy ward in Dhaka. It means that all are considered as conservancy wards. Kalabagan was selected because of its adoption of the 'Parichana Kalabagan', a private SWM initiative, which is considered to be the first of its kind in the country. This permits an examination of the effects of establishing this organization vis-à-vis the presence of conservancy service administered by Dhaka.

Sweepers and garbage truck drivers are key actors of conservancy service delivery in Bangladesh. In order to get access to information from them, they were regularly visited on a random basis in their workplace; on streets and at disposal sites. Sixty of them were interviewed and accompanied to their ghettos, and time was spent with them listening to their problems at work as well as discussing what they felt to be problems of the conservancy department in general.

Twenty interviews were also conducted with Dhaka and Chittagong officials and employees who were directly engaged in SWM, using open-ended questions. Twenty service users, selected randomly, were also interviewed by using the same tool.

All discussions, observations and interviews were transcribed in daily notebook and annotated with comments where applicable, and then carefully preserved for reference. This paper largely benefits from wide-ranging set of field notes, and thus building its data core.

Secondary data have been collected to substantiate the primary data and are mainly derived from the analysis and review of relevant academic articles and books, newspapers/magazines reports and previous studies. Admittedly, the limited access to official documents, because the Official Secrets Act of 1923 and the Government Servants Conduct Rules of 1979, bind bureaucrats to an oath of secrecy even forbidding them to provide official information to other government departments unless empowered by the government (The World Bank, 1996). Despite this administrative rigidity and restriction, the limited records of the two corporations related to the academic and technical qualifications of conservancy officials have been accessed.

Conceptual issues

Meaning of governance

The topic of governance is broad, multi-faceted, and of great complexity (Andrews, 2008). The concept was first highlighted, in a developing country context, in a 1989 World Bank report on *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth. A Long-Term Perspective Study* (The World Bank, 1989). Governance is ultimately concerned with creating the conditions for ordered rule and collective action (Stoker, 1998). Governance has a dual meaning; on the one hand, it refers to the empirical manifestations of state

¹ There are 6 city corporations in Bangladesh located at the divisional cities, namely, Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal, and Sylhet.

² The lowest administrative tier of urban local government.

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