

Residents Solve Own Sanitation Woes

By Irfan Shahzad

KARACHI - Unlike his neighbours in the opposite lane, Muhammad Salam lets his children play out in the street without the slightest worry.

That is because Salam, a resident of Ghaziabad locality in the big Orangi informal settlement in this port city, is happy for the concrete paving along the street he lives on. Beneath the concrete is a sewerage line that efficiently collects wastewater from all 24 houses in the area.

Not all the streets in this mega slum, however, enjoy the same privilege. Quite a few of the lanes are difficult to pass through due to streams of reeking water, thanks to the lack of an adequate municipal sewerage system, a common problem in the cities of this South Asian country.

"I have no worries that my kids will fall in the stinking, filthy water," boasted Salam. "The biggest advantage is that we have got rid of mosquitoes and the diseases they used to spread," added Noor Mohammad, another resident.

Mobilised by social workers from Orangi Pilot Project (OPP), a civil society organisation working in Karachi's slum dwellings for over two decades, residents here put their heads together to deal with one of the most pressing issues facing their community — a need to do something about their own environment.

OPP, having vast experience in the field, extended further help in the form of technical assistance. The result was a clean street, costing just Rs 600 (10 US dollars) per household.

The project was conceived and initiated in the early 1980s by Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan, a social scientist whose development techniques have been recognised widely around the world. He believed that if community initiatives get some support, sustainable development is possible using indigenous resources.

Orangi is considered the largest informal settlement in Asia, home to one-tenth of 12 million residents of Karachi, Pakistan's largest city. Immigrants from India and Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) as well as from the northern parts of the country began settling in Orangi in the 1960s.



Sewers run beneath this concrete pathway

The settlement expanded rapidly in the 1970s, but being an unsanctioned settlement Orangi did not qualify for official development funds.

Prior to the project, bucket latrines, or soak-pits, were the major means for the disposal of human waste. Wastewater was disposed via open sewers. Diseases and infections were widespread. A report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) noted that "both health and property of the residents were endangered" without sanitary latrines and underground sewer lines.

In the early 1980s, OPP came up with a simple design of steel moulds for latrines and manholes. This

Abdul Qadir



reduced the cost of constructing these facilities to a quarter of what a private contractor would have charged.

Abdul Qadir, an elderly man living in Orangi since 1975, recounted: "I still remember the times when we used to keep our doors closed because of the unbearable smell."

The people and concerned government agencies pooled their resources, with the latter contributing box sewers.

OPP used a unique 'component sharing' approach, enabling residents to build latrines in their homes, underground sewerage lines along the lanes and secondary sewers labelled as 'internal development'. The government, meanwhile, is responsible for 'external development', such as the construction of main sewers and treatment plants.

Soon, government and international agencies also sought help from OPP to integrate the model in development schemes sponsored by them. The OPP Research and Training Institute (OPP-RTI) was set up in 1988 to cater to this demand.

After Akhtar's death in 1999, a dedicated team of colleagues led by Parveen Rahman, the institute director, took over the project and continues to push this novel approach forward up to this day.

Rahman believes that the Orangi project's foremost success lies in "respecting, accepting and supporting community initiatives". She added: "We have also been able to build a partnership between people and government in the sanitation sector."

The Orangi model has been replicated in 17 cities and some 50 villages across Pakistan. In fact, some organisations that replicated the Orangi model in their respective cities — such as Anjum-e Samaji Behbud (Association for Social Welfare) in the textile city of Faisalabad — are believed to have outgrown the OPP.

Getting government support was not easy, however. It was not until 1991 that the Karachi Municipal Corp. recognised the Orangi project's work and inte-



Parveen Rahman, Director Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute

grated the model in its planning for the area.

Rahman believes that even with encouraging response from government agencies, public support is essential to the success of such projects. "They (government agencies) don't have the draftsmen, they don't have the necessary maps. Even the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board does not have a level machine," she pointed out.

"The government alone cannot reach everywhere. Help from community organisations such as OPP is an advantage," said Nisar Sario, executive district officer for work and services of the Karachi city district government.

OPP-RTI research indicates that over 70 percent of lane sewers in Karachi's slums have been built by the residents themselves.

More than 100,000 families are said to have benefited from the Orangi project in over 7,000 lanes. Community participation is estimated at Rs 102 million (1.6 million dollars) against Rs 500 million (over 8 million dollars) from the government.

However, considering that the government operates at a higher cost, "people have contributed around 60 percent to these projects," believes Parveen.

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