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Title: Barriers to Sustainable Urban WASH: Land Tenure and Occupancy Type in Dhaka’s Low-Income Settlements, Bangladesh

In urban low-income settlements, land tenure insecurity is known to affect access to safe, affordable and hygienic water and sanitation. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which land tenure type (e.g. public, private, disputed) and household occupancy type (e.g. ratio of landlords, house owners and tenants) affects sustainability of WASH infrastructure, such as tube wells and sanitation chambers, and management systems, such as Community Based Organisations (CBOs). This paper examines this complex issue through an in-depth case study of Dhaka, Bangladesh, where over 5 million people live in low-income settlements – over 70% of which are on ‘private’ or ‘disputed’ land, with a mixture of landlords, house owners and tenants.

Drawing on qualitative research conducted in three low-income settlements, including 213 semi-structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and 59 citywide key-informant interviews, I highlight two key ways in which land tenure and occupancy type affect WASH sustainability. Firstly, I argue that the perceived or actual threat of eviction, especially on ‘private’ or ‘disputed’ land, affects the willingness of NGOs, government agencies and user households to invest (time and money) in construction, operation and maintenance. Secondly, I argue that complex dynamics between landlords, house owners and tenants affects how facilities are managed, who participates in CBOs and invests in operation and maintenance. These dynamics contribute to the rapid deterioration and demise of WASH facilities and CBOs. An overarching trend is identified whereby NGOs in Dhaka have shifted away from mobilisation and advocacy on housing and land tenure rights, to service delivery. Whilst this has brought about improved access to WASH, the benefits are not necessarily shared or sustained (due to the dynamics above), and a mismatch is observed between the priorities of low-income residents (e.g. housing and land tenure security), and agenda of WASH NGOs and donors. To achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 6.1 and 6.2, I argue that a holistic approach to WASH, housing and land tenure security is required, with greater attention paid to the influence of land tenure and occupancy type on WASH sustainability in urban low-income settlements.