

NGO Forum Observes the World Water Day

At the forty-seventh session in 1992 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution designating March 22 as the World Water Day. This resolution is a milestone in the effort of ensuring safe water supply for all people on the earth. Being the apex networking organization of the NGOs and CBOs working in the WatSan sector, NGO Forum for Drinking Water Supply & Sanitation observed this day in Bangladesh in line with the global theme of this year's Water Day "Everyone Lives Downstream". To mark this Day a National Seminar was organized by NGO Forum at Dhaka on "Arsenic in Groundwater: Searching for Alternatives to Rural Water Supply".

The basic objectives of the Seminar were to discuss the extent of the current threat of arsenic in groundwater causing a new threat in water supply sector and severe health injury to people, search for suitable alternatives to Rural Water Supply to mitigate the problem, consolidate recommendations on this issue both on technical interventions and effective policy in the national level.

Mr. Zillur Rahman, Minister for Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh inaugurated the National Seminar. Mr. Deepak Bajrachariya from WES Section, UNICEF; Alhaz Md. Quaderuzzaman, Chief Engineer, DPHE; Mr. Preben Gondolf, Counselor, The Royal Danish Embassy; Mr. Mahfuz Anam, Editor, The Daily Star; and Mr. Akhteruzzaman, Member of Parliament, the National Assembly were present as Special Guests. The Inaugural Session was chaired by Dr. Fazle Hasan Abed, Executive Director, BRAC and Chairperson, NGO Forum for DWSS. The Working Session of the Seminar was chaired by Mr. Jeffrey S. Pereira, Executive Director, CARITAS-Bangladesh. Mr. S.M.A. Rashid, Executive Director, NGO Forum for DWSS delivered the Welcome Speech and Mr. Joseph Halder, Advocacy & Information Officer, NGO Forum for DWSS offered the vote of thanks to the participants.

About 170 representatives from different Government organizations, diplomatic missions, donor agencies, UN bodies, NGO sector and mass media participated in the Seminar.

The Working Session of the Seminar consisted of eleven papers followed by floor participation:

In his Welcome Speech Mr. S.M.A. Rashid identified arsenic contamination in groundwater as the most vital problem in safe water supply along with other problems like gradual declination of groundwater, increasing saline belt, pollution issues, etc. Among 490 thanas in 211 and 41 districts of Bangladesh, groundwater contains arsenic creating panic and environmental hazards. He articulated, presently 97% rural people have access to safe drinking water depending mainly on groundwater source. But the recent problem of arsenic contamination has set a dilemma of whether to seal off the tubewells and thus exposing millions of people to the risks and hazards of diarrhoea from unsafe water or to implement some alternative system of purification or safe sources, yet unknown the technology for which may both be impractical and expensive for the rural masses.

Mr. Rashid mentioned the different initiatives of NGO Forum in its effort to supply arsenic free safe water to the rural folks and enhancing people's awareness on this issue. Arsenic testing and red marking the affected tubewells and urging people not to drink or cook with their water, installing new tubewells only in arsenic free site with the help of arsenic testing, imparting arsenic awareness issues and testing techniques through regularly conducted trainings, installing alternate

technologies like Rain-Water Harvesting System, Pond Sand Filter, Ring-wells and other awareness campaign in the affected areas, etc. are the mitigational effort of NGO Forum.

As the Executive Director of NGO Forum, Mr. Rashid called upon all sectoral organizations to contribute in ensuring safe water, to prevent spreading of panic among people, rather to aware them on arsenic problems. He emphasized on the necessity of a national policy with focus on increase of use of surface water and surface water management for supply of water for agricultural purpose. He hoped for the commitment from the media, the Govt. and looked forward for viable alternatives to safe water supply.

Mr. Zillur Rahman, the Chief Guest, termed the success of Bangladesh in the safe water supply and sanitation sector as the highest among the third world countries which is threatened currently by arsenic contamination in groundwater. He mentioned the detection initiatives by DPHE, Dhaka Community Hospital and other organizations since the detection of the occurrence of arsenic in groundwater in Bangladesh in 1993.

The Minister disclosed that till now 4,600 poor people have been identified as arsenic victims. The number, apparently a small one in a country of 12 crore of people, but the issue is seemed to be of great concern to the nation. He stated that three projects have already been taken up under the LGRD & Cooperatives Ministry with the assistance of UNICEF, British DFID for two and the World Bank and UNFPA for the third one with a view to testing sample tubewells and investigating and investing in the sector. Moreover with the joint World Bank and Swiss Government Financial Support the Local Government Division of the LGRD&C Ministry has already launched "The Bangladesh Arsenic Mitigation Water Supply Project" to cover two municipalities and four thousand villages, he said, adding that the present government has directed to preserve arsenic free drinking water with purification facilities in a reserved pond for each village to explore the feasibility of supplying safe drinking water to the rural folks.

Mentioning the success of NGO Forum in coordinating and proper implementation of safe water supply service of the NGOs, Mr. Rahman emphasized on a coordination between government and NGOs to solve the arsenic crisis.

Welcoming more innovative approach for purifying tubewell water for ensuring arsenic free use and more thoughts on the already known alternatives, he also put stress on retaining from polluting surface water ensuring environment friendly use of water.

Mr. Akhteruzzaman in his speech opined that arsenic testing should be carried out with all the existing tubewells of the country. He expressed his concern over the lack of availability of testing kits especially in the affected areas.

With great concern over the issue that no major national level debate has yet been made in the National Assembly on arsenic problem, the MP expressed his viewpoint that the suggestions, recommendations made through different seminars and workshops should be reviewed and discussed through debate in the National Assembly. Then these recommendations and suggestions could be forwarded to the government through proper channel for necessary actions. He emphasized on an integrated effort through proper leadership in combating the problem.

Mr. Mahfuz Anam invoked the government to depend on its own resources instead of depending on bilateral donors in solving the arsenic problem as the government is the major actor. Instead of

talking so much about purifying arsenic contaminated water, emphasis should be given on stopping to put toxic hazards into surface water. Public awareness activities is somewhat a vague term, rather leadership awareness should be enhanced so that a uniform, concerned, sincere policy formulation is possible, he opined. Mr. Anam said, we should go back to surface water for drinking purpose as we have the sources like rain-water, rivers, canals, ponds and so on utilizing cheap filtration devices. He emphasized on the responsibility of the media, individuals, NGOs and other catalyts to contribute in combating the arsenic threat.

Alhaz Md. Quaderuzzaman said that the NGOs, including NGO Forum along with the government have taken initiatives in combating the arsenic threat. Many specialists from home and abroad have extended various suggestions and recommendations for searching for alternatives to water supply and mitigation programme in the arsenic affected areas. Different programmes has already been taken and to be taken in future in arsenic mitigation indicate our positive role in solving the arsenic crisis. He mentioned that valuable information have been gathered through a recent study conducted by the British DFID. He called upon all concerned for a combined and continued effort to sustain the success in safe water supply achieved through years of endeavour and to solve the crisis.

Mr. Preben Gondolf mentioned the pilot project launched by the support from the Danish Government in Laxmipur and Choumuhoni Pourashavas where arsenic problem is quite severe. He said that although the right solution of the problem had yet not been found but at least a workable solution has been found out. He welcomed all to visit these activities and expressed the wish to provide service to those who are interested to work in the field and thus enhance a joint movement towards solution. The strategy of his Government is not to work in those areas where they are already working, which is not in line with the national policy and not in line with the general understanding and approach of how the problem should be solved. He emphasized that in future the seminars and workshops should explore “what has been done so far and make comparisons of different kinds of approaches” instead of “what is going to be done”.

Mr. Deepak Bajrachariya acknowledged with gratitude the valuable efforts of many organizations for a better understanding of the challenge gradually through the years and also his delight in providing support in the endeavours of different organizations.

He emphasized on the needs to move forward with rapid coordinated action in the key areas like mobilization, capacity building and involvement of the community for producing and utilizing testing kits, providing alternate safe water technology, awareness campaign, training of doctors and health workers for diagnosis and identifying of arsenicosis patients, and striving for better understanding of arsenic poisoning and what can be done for those who run the risk of developing disease due to chronic exposure to arsenic. He expressed UNICEF’s commitment to work together with stakeholders from all classes in combating the arsenic threat.

UNICEF’s key effort in proceeding for arsenic mitigation includes the installation of 4770 deep tubewells, 450 PSFs preceded by testing of existing tubewells around the site in this year, building up communication strategy, joint UNICEF and DPHE allocation of an additional half a million dollars to work with some of the NGOs who are concentrating more on arsenic mitigation issue. This fund will be utilized to have a maximum impact on 500 selected villages in four thanas most affected by arsenic which will scale up on-going and planned activities around the country in arsenic mitigation, he stated.

He expressed his concern for the extent of the problem while only around 5 per cent of the rural population are aware and some misperceptions exist among people like wrongly believing arsenicosis as contagious making the women and children the most vulnerable group.

Mr. Fazle Hasan Abed in the Chairperson's speech opined that such ventures would be effective in arsenic mitigation in Bangladesh as were undertaken by BRAC after the discovery of Oral Rehydration Therapy to dramatically stop the death toll by diarrhoeal diseases of millions of children in Bangladesh. Special emphasis was put to develop the skill of the community on ORT and for using it during diarrhoeal episodes. Similarly the extensive measures needed to be undertaken in solving the arsenic crisis should start with venturing in the fields for checking out all tubewells and finding out the exact number of affected ones among the four million tubewells throughout the country. He mentioned his instruction to BRAC to develop a proposal in this regard to test and check all tubewells gradually started from the severely affected areas and then countrywide. The next step needed to be taken is to identify suitable alternative safe water sources in the villages and motivate the people in using those. Since the NGOs have intervention in more than 80% areas of the country, they should come forward to undertake effective community mobilization programme.

In the working session as many as 11 papers were presented by resource persons from and outside NGO Forum. These papers covered subjects like groundwater situation in Bangladesh, different alternate technologies for arsenic free safe water supply, curative measures, arsenic treatment technology, test kits and their comparative study, GO-NGO coordination in Arsenic mitigation, etc. The presentations were: "Groundwater: Bangladesh Perspective" by Dr. Mohammad Ali, BUET; "Operational Strategy in GO-NGO Collaboration for Arsenic Mitigation" by Mr. Fariduddin Ahmed Mia, DPHE; "Different Curative Measures of Arsenicosis" presented by Dr. A.H. Milton, Dhaka Community Hospital; "Overview on Different Arsenic Testing Kits" by Mr. Ehetashamul Hoque, DPHE, "Comparative Results of Different Kits" by Mr. Richard Johnston, UNICEF; "Alternative Technologies for Arsenic Mitigation" by Prof. Dr. Feroze Ahmed, BUET; "Field Results on Arsenic Removal Techniques" by Dr. Jens Thogersen, DPHE-DANIDA; "Alum Coagulation Method" and "Activated Alumina Absorption Method" by Dr. Faruque Ahmed and Dr. M.A. Jalil of BUET respectively; "Passive Sedimentation" by Ms. Clarissa Brocklehurst, WaterAid; "Safi Filter" by Prof. Syed Shafiullah, Jahangirnagar University and lastly "Results of Different Alternative Water Technologies" by Mr. Jillur Rahman and Mr. Rowan McKittrick, NGO Forum. The resourceful presentations hailed appreciation and interest of the participants which were followed by open discussion.