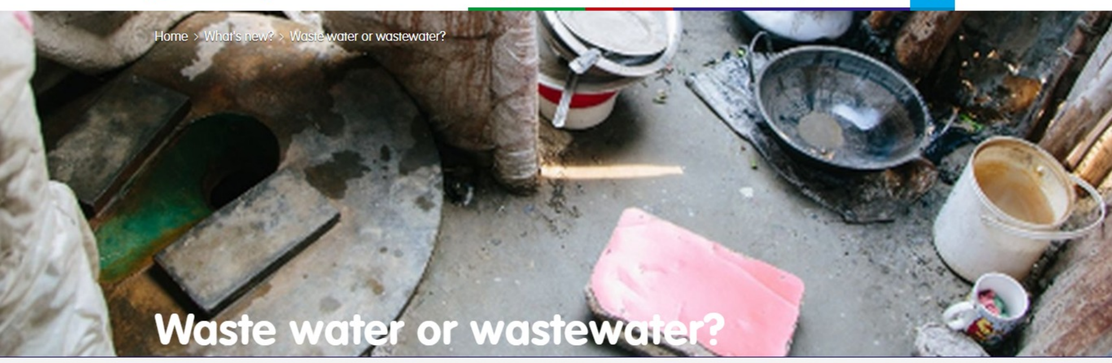

Waste water or wastewater?

Blog

Yes, the space does make a difference. In Khulna, a city in Bangladesh with around 4,500 people per square kilometre, space is very limited and always a challenge for development initiatives. If it's a space for managing waste, everyone says "please not in my backyard". With increasing access to water around houses, people tend to waste water thereby increasing challenges to treat wastewater. People are also focused on getting the wastewater out of their own compound, after which it becomes somebody else's problem.

Inadequate sanitation continues to burden communities and also countries in terms of health, livelihood, and lost economic opportunities. While great strides have been made in eliminating open defecation in rural areas, urban centers continue to rely on poorly designed and operating on-site wastewater systems that discharge highly infectious wastewater to surface and groundwater.

In Khulna, 65% of the households have septic tanks but almost 85% of them do not have a soak well and more than 90% of the wastewater is disposed of directly or indirectly into waterbodies and the local environment. When asked, people will have several explanations on where their poop goes: *"Our masons are very smart and they have made an arrangement that my waste containment never gets full"* or *"Our waste containment is so large that it won't fill for a few decades"*. But as there is no collection or treatment plant, where does the poop actually go?

Disposal of faecal sludge was never seen as a problem because when toilets got blocked, manual emptiers used to empty the waste containment and just release the sludge to the nearest drain or in water bodies. Water is getting scarce but we use more water as a medium to get rid of waste from toilets or for cleaning. Cities are spending large sums of funds to bring in water from afar, but invest very little in sanitation. Whereas proper investment in sanitation would reduce the utility cost for treating wastewater. And while centralised sewerage systems are being planned for, the reality is that on-site and decentralised wastewater management coupled with faecal sludge management will continue to be the only option to address wastewater management in urban areas in the meantime.

As a result of working together with SNV through our FSM programme, the local authorities in Khulna (Khulna City Corporation, Khulna Development Authority, Khulna Water Supply and Sewerage Authority, along with line departments) have each made a commitment that no wastewater should be disposed without treatment. They recently formed a technical team to come up with recommendations for further improvements to localised technical solutions and the workflow for the approval of buildings. With regard to the national building code, we already successfully advocated for the inclusion of an improved sanitary plan with septic tank and additional approval rounds for construction.

Increasingly, urban development is directed upwards, as there is limited space for horizontal development. This means that more and more people are living on smaller and smaller parcels, making it much more difficult to accommodate wastewater on-site through traditional on-site wastewater management technologies such as septic tank systems which require considerable space. Local authorities in Khulna have now also become interested in other wastewater management methodologies that can be applied to smaller parcels and include better treatment and disposal options.

So, let's create some space for innovation and tackle the #wastewater challenge together!

Expert

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