Approximately 50% of the world’s population is concentrated in urban areas. This figure – the highest level in human history - includes about 1 billion people living in slums. These rapidly growing unplanned areas have irregular water supplies and few or no sanitation options, endangering public health and hindering economic development.

Communities and schools are regularly dependent on intermittent water supplies (of low quality) delivered by water tanker. Often residents’ only other options are to buy water at exorbitant rates from private vendors, adopt self-imposed rationing, or collect water from unreliable sources. As for sanitation, there’s little space to construct latrines in most slums, so most people either defecate in the open or use ‘flying toilets’: plastic bags that are used to defecate in before being thrown over the fence or into the road.

Faecal sludge is often allowed to accumulate in poorly designed pits, discharged into storm drains and open water, or dumped into waterways, wasteland and insanitary landfill sites.

Simavi believes that everybody, no matter where they live, has the right to sustainable water, sanitation and hygiene services and education. We want to improve the living conditions of the entire urban population by providing water and sanitation services to the poorest urban communities. The situation is pressing as the rapid rate of urbanisation is undermining the progress made towards the Millennium Development Goal target for sanitation in urban areas: urgent action is needed if we want to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of universal access to sanitation by 2030 and take an important step to reducing inequality and improving basic health for all.
Simavi believes that it is a human right to have access to water and sanitation. Everyone has the right to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities. However we know from our on the ground experience in Africa and Asia that it’s hard to guarantee sustainable service provision in informal slum areas as residents often lack tenancy rights and there is always a risk of denying use of the area by private landlords. So when implementing WASH programmes in informal settlements, we take into account the risk that residents could be evicted and moved to another site at any moment. For example, Simavi supported a viable business promoting ‘PeePoo’ bags in Kibera, the largest informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. PeePoo is a single-use, self-sanitising and biodegradable toilet that turns into fertilizer after one month. These bags provide a user and environment-friendly solution and were accompanied by a campaign involving hygiene promotion, awareness raising and community dialogue covering the whole spectrum of sanitation chain services.

Formal slums built on public land are usually more permanent than ones on private land. Yet, these settlements are often unattractive to live in due to location and lack of proper services. In Malawi, we introduced water kiosks as part of a Private Sector Service Contract between the Blantyre and Lilongwe Water Boards, ACP-EU Water Facility and the European Investment Bank. The project aims to improve the supply of affordable, sustainable and reliable drinking water to approximately 1.5 million inhabitants. This includes the extension of the drinking water services to 700,000 people and basic sanitation to 468,000 people in the low-income areas of Blantyre and Lilongwe. Simavi facilitated the collaboration between the Kiosk Management Unit of the Water Boards and the local NGOs who work on setting up Water Users Associations in the low-income areas. After assessing the local desire for household connections, ability to take out a loan to pay for the connection and the willingness of all stakeholders to commit themselves to the steps needed to set up and operate such a fund, an Access to Water facility guaranteeing 24-hour water access was established.

Experience has taught us that in urban areas water can be sold in bulk by area-based or neighbourhood-based organisations. This reduces the organisational burden of the higher level or citywide WASH service operators.

We train these water and sanitation committees to:

1. be able to assess the basic needs, demands and wishes of their communities;
2. understand the technical and budgetary service limitations;
3. understand the relevant government rules and regulations.

Their involvement in the process ensures end users’ support and assistance during the construction and operation of WASH services – as well as guaranteeing their payment of the necessary financial contributions and user fees. In addition, we train the community to maintain the new facilities and provide dedicated training on health and hygiene related subjects. This is vital in ensuring the long-term sustainability of any services.

With these factors in mind, Simavi and its local partners ensure that WASH service delivery are accessible and affordable for the poorest communities in urban areas. A priority of Simavi’s work in urban areas is to facilitate slum residents to organise themselves in already existing social groups. They find improved WASH services of such high importance that they are keen to get organised and support the realisation of a WASH services themselves. In other words: communities are mobilised, organised and empowered to form water and sanitation committees that assume responsibility for ownership, operation and maintenance of the WASH facilities.
Impact of our work

By tackling WASH issues in urban areas, we can stop preventable fatal diseases and boost social and economic development. Improving WASH services in densely populated poor urban areas creates a standard of hygiene, healthcare and equality that allows every man, woman and child to live productively. To ensure that everyone, no matter their income or location, can benefit from improved WASH services, we focus on working with marginalised communities. They are empowered to claim their WASH rights and demand services themselves, leading to the construction of long-term, sustainable water access. As a result of our interventions, a large number of low-income communities know how to organise themselves, articulate their needs and demands, understand their health problems and how to reduce health risks through proper hygiene behaviour practices, and manage communal WASH facilities.

By providing formal urban settlements with an integrated and sustainable water supply and sanitation services, these areas become more attractive to live in. Once WASH services are in place, these settlements attract schools and clinics, the first steps to economic and social development.

Case Study: Improved WASH services in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2012-2016

Dhaka, with its 15 million inhabitants, is one of the fastest growing cities in the world, absorbing an estimated 300,000 to 400,000 migrants annually. About 28% of Dhaka’s total population of Dhaka city is poor and lives in the slum areas. Existing water connections are often illegally made, and water is sold by private vendors at rates that are (sometimes ten times) higher than DWASA’s, the public drinking water company, tariff. Illegal, or unauthorised, connections contribute to DWASA’s high Non-Revenue Water (NRW) figures and deteriorating infrastructure and water quality. Sanitation, if available, consists of ‘hanging toilets’ or badly maintained communal pit-latrines. Pit-emptying or sludge removal services are available in Dhaka, however at a scale that is much too limited to serve all slum areas. Solid waste facilities are insufficient or non-existing in most areas.

Simavi works together with VEI (an international water operator) and DWASA to improve WASH services and practices for Dhaka’s low-income communities in a sustainable, replicable and up-scalable way. We worked simultaneously on the following steps:

- The construction and installation of facilities (water points, toilets, legalisation of illegal water points, restoration of pathways after installation of the distribution network, solid waste collection facilities);
- The provision of hygiene promotion, training and capacity building activities;
- The formation of capable community based organisations to take care of the institutional, financial and technical sustainability of the WASH services.

Communities are mobilised, organised and empowered to form a Community Based Organisation (CBO) that assumes responsibility for ownership, operation and maintenance of the water and sanitation facilities. The CBO enters a contract with the service provider, in which the service provider ensures continuous water provision to the communities. The CBO itself is responsible for billing and collecting payment from individual households and transferring money to DWASA, ensuring community involvement and ‘ownership’ of the WASH services. Any illegal connections are removed to decrease non-revenue water. This results in a win-win situation for all parties, as DWASA generates income via legal connections and the LIC inhabitants get better quality water.

During 2014 and 2015, 25,300 inhabitants will benefit from this joint intervention that will install and rehabilitate WASH facilities in the area, train the community to maintain new facilities and provide education on health and hygiene related subjects.
About Simavi

Simavi is an international non-profit organisation working towards a world in which basic health is accessible to all. Our goal is to structurally improve the basic health of 10 million people in marginalised communities in Africa and Asia by 2020. By doing so, we enable them to build a better existence and break the cycle of poverty.

Our experience over the past ninety years has shown us that investing in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is vital for people to be able to lead a healthy life. Therefore we concentrate our efforts in these two areas.

Theory of Change

All our programmes are based on three integrated pillars:

1. Empower communities to demand quality services and to practice healthy behaviour;
2. Create a supportive, enabling environment in which all stakeholders are aware of their roles and responsibilities, work together and can be held accountable;
3. Ensure that people use affordable, suitable and sustainable WASH and SRHR services. This is the core of our Theory of Change – it’s designed to ensure that everyone involved, from community to governmental level, works together towards realising sustainable improvement of basic health.

In the many years Simavi has been active, we’ve built up an extensive network of reliable and capable local partners and gathered a deep understanding of the religious, ethical and cultural sensitivities within every community we work with. This is crucial to realise sustainable change.

We know how to build the capacity of local partners to make sure that the community’s demands are voiced to regional, national and international influential stakeholders, according the law, legislation and regulation of the countries we work in.

We’ve established extensive local and international networks in WASH, SRHR and beyond. We believe that the interaction between these different stakeholders is crucial to learn from each other and to make sure that expertise and experience of our local partners are shared at international WASH and SRHR conferences, as this enables the southern voice in the international debate. In this way we create new synergies and partnerships within our networks, bringing together partners whose expertise complements each other with one goal: to facilitate more people enjoying basic health.