



# Sanitation in small towns

Minutes of side-event held on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018  
World Water Forum, in Brasilia

## Background

Most development programmes on sanitation in developing countries target big cities or rural areas. Therefore, there is a severe lack of attention given to sanitation in small towns, which are these areas between urban and rural perimeters, and even though they host a major part of the world population, in particular in developing countries.

These neglected areas represent a major challenge for reaching SDG6 and especially target 6.2 and 6.3, since sanitation services in small towns require adapting to their singularities in order to design financially viable services, which includes the safe management of excreta.

In August 2017, pS-Eau organized two side-events on this topic during the World Water Week in Stockholm in collaboration with Eawag-Sandec, GIZ, Gret, SuSanA, WaterAid and the World Bank Group.

In order to bring the topic on the agenda of other international platforms of debates, pS-Eau organized one side-event during the World Water Forum in Brasilia on the 21<sup>st</sup> March 2018. **This side-event aimed at discussing about relevant experiences of full sanitation chain developed in small towns from the Global South.**

## Introduction

*Colette Génevaux, pS-Eau (see powerpoint)*

Small towns represent a grey area, between rural and urban. Although the context and size can vary greatly between countries and regions, sanitation in small towns faces similar challenges regarding the viability of the service.

Indeed, small towns are often too small to have a viable full chain sanitation approach, from collection of excreta to treatment and end-disposal or reuse, but are also too big to benefit from the sanitation approaches used in rural areas. Due to their density and sometimes their high growing rate, health risks caused by the lack of sanitation are higher than in rural areas. There are also higher expectations from its population regarding services. Additionally, sanitation markets are fragmented, unregulated and the private sector involvement in sanitation services is minimal due to low economies of scale.

Given the difficulty of establishing a set definition of small towns, a general definition was formulated by a research study from Cranfield University (work in progress):

*“An area that is sufficiently large and dense in concentration of both people and enterprises with water and sanitation needs that may be served and benefit from the economies of scale offered through some kind of centrally managed water supply and wastewater management system”*

Generally, pS-Eau's work on small towns focuses on settlements between 3,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. It has identified several challenges for small towns, including:

- The weak institutional framework in small towns appears to be a big challenge due to ongoing devolution processes, unclear responsibilities of local authorities, etc.
- Capacity building is essential for ensuring good management of services, but small towns often face a 'brain drain' of trained people, who tend to move to bigger cities.
- Financial viability is key and sanitation services need to work on economy of scale to make it possible. Therefore, the scale of intervention for private operator needs to be questioned when developing services.

In order to understand better this question, pS-Eau is leading several researches or programmes on the topic of sanitation in small towns:

- The [PRADALIS](#) programme (2017-2019) is a research-action project which aims to improve the understanding of sanitation in small towns between 5,000 to 30,000 inhabitants in Senegal;
- pS-Eau is also conducting a more general research programme on sanitation in small towns from the Global South. As part of this programme, a group project conducted by Cranfield University students and sponsored by pS-Eau has done a systematic review of projects of sanitation in small towns (ongoing);
- Two sessions were organized by pS-Eau and partner organizations during the World Water Week in Stockholm in 2017 on the topic of sanitation in small towns ([read the minutes here](#)). Another session is planned for the next World Water Week in 2018 ([more information here](#)).

## Panel discussion

The session brought together a panel of sanitation experts to discuss their experience of sanitation in small towns. Christophe Le Jallé, deputy-director of pS-Eau, moderated the discussions.

**Panellists:** Dame Ndiaye (pS-Eau), Cecilia Rodrigues (GIZ / Sustainable Sanitation Alliance), Prit Salian (i-San Consulting), Katrien Van Hooydonk (Protos), Miguel Vargas-Ramirez (World Bank)

### Q1. *Why is the question of sanitation in small towns important?*

The panellists have highlighted the need to tackle the lack of sanitation services in small towns to achieve the SDGs. Access to sanitation is often lagging behind when drinking water services are available in small towns. This raises the question of the appropriate managing system for small towns, since decentralized sanitation options are not always appropriate. A growing portfolio of the World Bank currently tackles these questions.

Several speakers mentioned the fast growth of small towns as a challenge for sanitation. Prit Salian (i-San Consulting) explained that, in Uganda, sanitation is under the responsibility of the local government, which often faces difficulties to deal with the fast changes of small towns. Katrien Van Hooydonk (Protos) indicated that these quick changes could also be an opportunity, as the population of small towns have higher expectations regarding sanitation, which facilitates behaviour shifts and demand creation for sanitation services.

Dame Ndiaye (pS-Eau) explained that, in Senegal, small towns suffer from the lack of clear institutional framework. Indeed, towns between 5,000 and 30,000 inhabitants are not included in

the perimeters of the national operators (ONAS in urban areas and the Direction of Sanitation in rural areas). Some of these villages, which have grown quickly these past years, are now too big to follow rural sanitation planning and should be under the responsibility of ONAS, but the latter does not always have the capacities to cover these areas.



**Q2. What is your experience of working on sanitation in small towns? What challenges have you faced? What lessons did you learn from it?**

***Katrien Van Hooydonk (PROTOS)***

Protos worked in several very small towns in Ecuador. Through a twinning relationship with a Belgium city and the city of Ona, they were able to put WASH on the agenda, which resulted in a shared investment for a collection service and a treatment plant: 30 % of the investment came from the Ecuadorian city and 70 % by the partner. In this case, the Ecuadorian institutional framework was clear, which was a big advantage for the project. However, the twinning partnership and the realisation and exploitation of the infrastructure were subjected to the political changes: the project was forced to a break with the arrival of a new elected leadership and started over at the end of its mandate.

***Prit Salian (I-San Consulting)***

In Uganda, small towns don't have the right scale to make sanitation services viable. Some small towns are currently experimenting a cluster approach to tackle this problem. They have organized into 5 or 6 clusters, no further than 30 km apart, which corresponds to the distance to which emptiers can still work. Individual sanitation plans have been developed for each towns. One of the main challenges were the political support needed for the sludge treatment, in particular for some issues of land tenure regarding the location of the drying beds. This was solved by discussing with the religious leaders, who offered to build the treatment plant on their land.

### ***Cecilia Rodrigues (GIZ / SuSanA)***

In Latin America, there is a need to move on towards decentralized sanitation. Indeed, conventional sanitation with sewerage network is often considered as the only solution. However, this becomes a problem for small towns, which can't afford those expensive solutions.

### ***Dame Ndiaye (pS-Eau)***

Led by the pS-Eau in partnership with CONGAD, Eau Vive, GRET and University of Dakar, the PRADALIS program is currently looking at sanitation in some small towns of Senegal. The programme has identified around 150 small towns, for which the real problem is the evacuation and treatment of excreta (lack of emptying trucks, lack of capacity). Among other topics, the ongoing programme will question the planning, the integration of sanitation services into national strategies and the appropriate technologies for small towns.

### ***Miguel Vargas-Ramirez (World Bank)***

The World Bank is currently working on city-wise sanitation approaches, which consider the combination of sanitation solutions (centralized sanitation and on-site sanitation) as well as condominal sewerage.

## **Reactions from the audience**

Stefan Reuter, from BORDA, talked about an experience in India, where a private operator runs a service in a 30,000-inhabitant town, showing that, where there is a political will it is possible to have successful sanitation.

A representative from ONAS mentioned the project supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Dakar, which shows that the private sector can make profit on sanitation.

A representative from the French Red Cross has highlighted the need to raise awareness on the fact that it is possible to make money from sanitation.

## **Conclusion**

### ***Cléo Lossouarn, Syndicat Interdépartemental pour l'Assainissement de l'Agglomération de Paris (SIAAP)***

This session showed the diversity of contexts and questions when we talk about small towns: a diversity in the scale of small towns, but also in the different technologies and sanitation options used. Sanitation in small town is "in between", that's why it is challenging.

From the different experiences presented, we could see that the main problem for sanitation in small towns is not regarding access to toilets but collection and treatment of excreta because of the density/concentration of people. On these issues, there are obviously similarities with both rural and urban areas: the lack of skills in operation and maintenance, the need to work on the full sanitation chain at scale, the unattractiveness of sanitation for political leaders, etc. However, small town have singular economic models and utilities because of the size of their territories, the informal sector is widely present all over the sanitation chain.

The proximity of decision makers or political leaders in small towns is an advantage but can also be a risk.