

The initial focus of investigation in Bangladesh was along the borders with West Bengal, India. The first nationwide random sample survey revealed that the epicenter of arsenic contamination lies not in the western frontier but in the southeast in the Meghna estuary area. Meanwhile, the Dhaka Community Hospital (DCH), in collaboration with SOES of Jadavpur University, continued extensive investigation in many parts of the country through 1996 and 1997. The results of all these investigations were made public during an international conference organized by DCH in 1997. This attracted widespread attention of the local and international media to the seriousness of the crisis.

Following the international conference, a World Bank fact-finding mission visited Bangladesh in April 1997 to assess the arsenic situation. The Mission recommended immediate commencement of a hydrogeological study and pilot-scale emergency activity in selected areas before a comprehensive project could be initiated.

1.2 UNDP's Emergency Arsenic Mitigation Program

The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) was amongst the first donor agency to mobilize funds in launching an emergency arsenic mitigation program in accordance to the recommendations of the World Bank mission. The funds were channeled through the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW). The program was divided into various components. Tubewell and health screening components of the program were awarded to DCH considering the expertise gained by them in these areas.

The first phase covered 200 of the most affected villages. A follow-up second phase covered an additional 300 villages. DCH tested every tubewell in these 500 villages. This was the first-ever comprehensive tubewell testing in the country. They also identified patients suffering from arsenic poisoning. In addition, they also conducted awareness raising activities.

The work done by DCH provided important insight into the challenges in dealing with the arsenic crisis. This pilot initiative was a pre-cursor to the more comprehensive Bangladesh Arsenic Mitigation Water Supply Project (BAMWSP). The experience gained by DCH in addressing the crisis at village level made important contribution to the plan of action of BAMWSP.