



# Story of Honey Suckers – Desludging Service Providers in Kathmandu Valley

By: Reetu Rajbhandari

## Background

- 16 municipalities and 2 Metropolitan cities lie within Kathmandu Valley.
- Haphazard urbanization is exacerbating water and sanitation related problems.
- 170,000 m<sup>3</sup> faecal Sludge (FS) generated annually from existing different on-site sanitation systems, i.e. pits and septic tanks (ENPHO, 2014).
- Study conducted in 2017 to better understand the desludging service in the valley and associated issues and challenges faced by desludging service providers.
- Used questionnaire survey, field observations.

## Desludging service

- FS desludging service in Kathmandu valley is an informal business of private operators. It is considered a 'dirty' profession with very low esteem. Desludgers often do not disclose their job to their family members.
- In 2017 in Kathmandu valley, there were 16 desludging trucks managed by 11 private entrepreneurs.
- Approximately 40 people are engaged in the profession.
- In most cases, customers (households or institutions) who need desludging service contact mobile phone numbers provided in newspaper advertisements, wall posters and messages, and through personal contacts.

## Flow diagram of Desludging FS

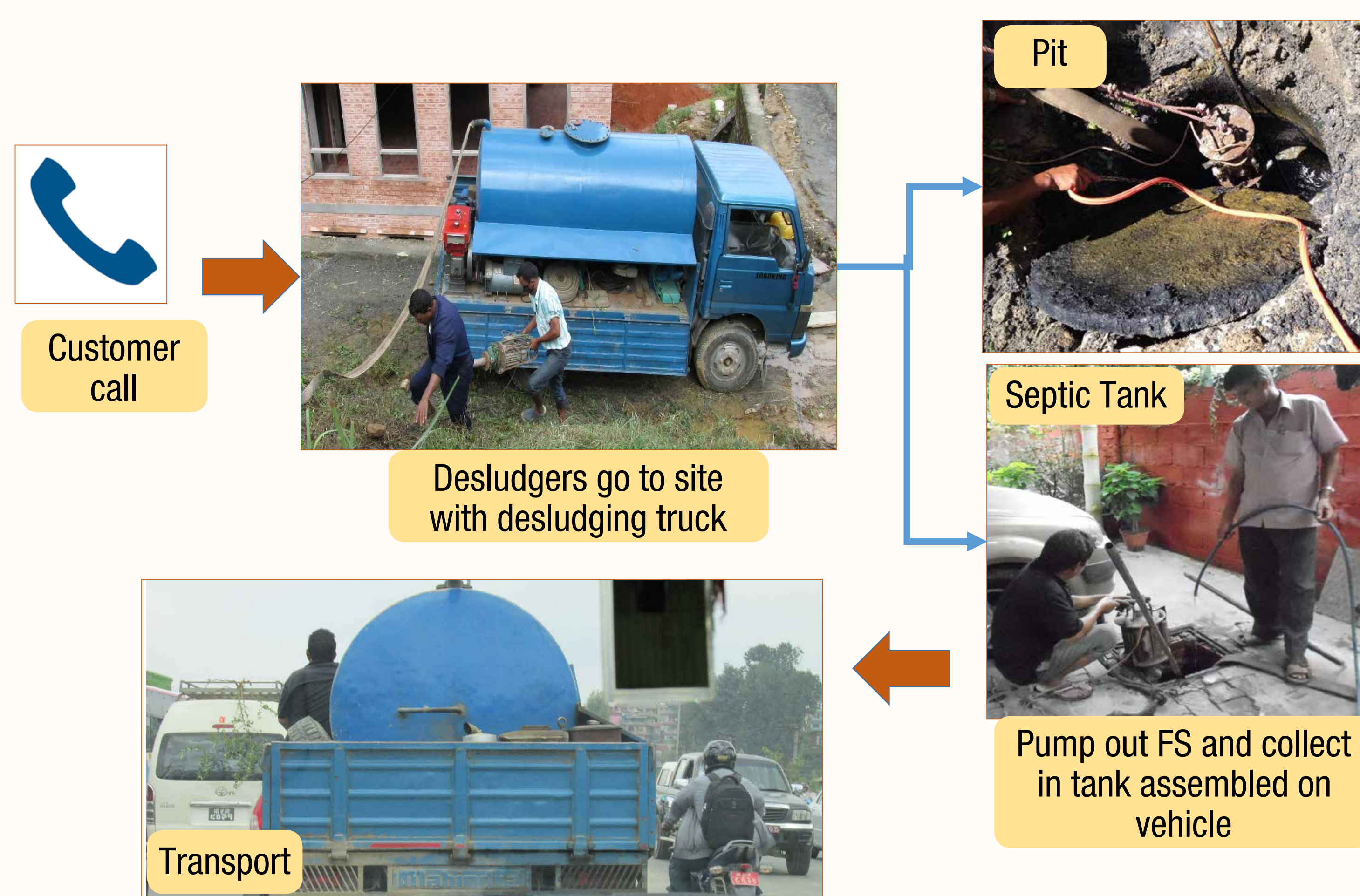


Figure 1 Different equipment for desludging faecal sludge from the containments.



Discretely dump FS into a river, drain or open space

## Recommendations

- Officially recognize desludging service including registration of desludging vehicles.
- Municipalities should make necessary policy and guidelines for supervision and monitoring of construction of septic tanks as in approved drawing.
- Government society should recognize and appreciate desludging service as other professions.
- Communities and local leaders (and police) should respect desludging professionals in an appropriate manner.
- Ensure minimal health facilities and protection gears for the workers.
- Municipalities and other government agencies to provide sites and Faecal Sludge Treatment Plants to desludgers for proper disposal and treatment of faecal sludge.

## Issues and Challenges

1. No standard design of containments (septic tanks and pits)



No proper manhole – need to break plaster and tiles to reach the containment

Unlined containments (liquid already drained out)  
Compact FS is difficult to extract, need to add water first



2. Difficult to access containments



Need to remove soil and other objects placed/built above containments

Majority of containments are built in difficult-to-reach corners and even under bedrooms and kitchens

Inaccessible containments	
Source: ENPHO, 2014	
Septic Tank	83%
Pit Latrine	53%

3. Lack of government and social recognition

- Low esteem job (discretely done)
- Hide from family and relatives
- Dignity issue
  - Customers do not touch them or allow entry into houses
  - Water not provided for washing and cleaning
- Harassment from traffic police and local leaders (dons)
  - Need to provide probe along the way



No use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

4. Health hazard

- direct contact with faeces with no or minimal facilities
- no health insurance

5. Legality

- Vehicles not registered as FS desludging vehicle (no provision)
- Haphazard disposal of collected FS in rivers or open public land.

6. Remuneration

- Salary based on service trips - irregular
- No job security (can be fired on-spot)

Monthly earning of a honey sucker (n=15)

Description	Average NPR
Average desludging trip per month	90 trips
Income per trip	106.25
Income per month (trip)	9,562.5
Monthly salary	3,625.00
Earning per month	13,187.50

Source: ENPHO, 2014



Haphazard disposal of faecal sludge

Customer perspective

Household response (n=473)	
Satisfied with emptying services	78%
Satisfied with emptying charges	81%
Concerned about illegal dumping by desludgers	78%
Willing to pay more for improved service and proper disposal of faecal sludge	67%

Source: ENPHO, 2014

Customers Willingness to pay

Customers willing-to-pay more for proper emptying and treatment of FS	
NPRs	Willing customers
< 500	44%
500	35%
500 - 1000	19%
> 1000	2%

Source: ENPHO, 2014



Interaction with customers

## What do the Honey-Suckers say?

- "We do not have proper place to dispose the collected faecal sludge and there is no support from local community leaders and traffic police."
- "I can pay up to Rs 500 to a treatment plant nearby if there is one. But, If the treatment cost is high and other desludgers continue to dump sludge haphazardly as now, there is no point of taking sludge to a treatment plant and pay. I also have to keep the cost low to remain competitive in the market."
- "We are uncertain about our business in future. We have faecal sludge tank mounted on a "Mini Tata". In case we need to stop our desludging business, we can remove the sludge tank and use the truck for transport business."