



Our Water
Our Right

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YOUNG WATER HEROES





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This is a publication by ActionAid Bangladesh. ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to further human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe everyone has the power within them to create change for themselves, their families, and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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Introduction

The water crisis is a harsh reality across the coastal districts of Bangladesh. Acute shortages of safe drinking water, fragile embankments, rising salinity, and frequent climate shocks, compounded by weak water governance systems, continue to intensify suffering.

In response, young leaders in coastal communities, with support from ActionAid Bangladesh, have been stepping forward for over a decade to defend water as a fundamental right. Drawing on lived experience, they are organising movements, leading advocacy and campaigns, and holding institutions such as local government bodies, the Department of Public Health Engineering, and the Bangladesh Water Development Board to account. Through collective action, they are challenging violations of water rights and pushing for sustainable, people-centred solutions.

Young Water Heroes features the stories of ten youth leaders whose leadership is reshaping water justice efforts in coastal Bangladesh. This publication recognises their journeys of resilience and courage, amplifies their voices, and seeks to inspire continued action towards just and accountable water governance.

Editors' Note

Editing and shaping this collection of stories has been a deeply meaningful journey for us. Over the past year, we have worked closely together on issues of water rights and governance across Bangladesh's coastal regions. One of us has guided the strategic direction of this work, while the other has translated those strategies into action in collaboration with young leaders and their communities. Through this shared process, we have witnessed how water scarcity, limited access to safe drinking water, fragile embankments, and failures in water governance continue to define everyday realities in these regions.

What we have seen closely, however, is resilience.

The young leaders featured in *Young Water Heroes* are not only observers of the water crisis; they live within it. Their stories emerge from lived experience, including mobilising communities, organising movements, challenging dominant narratives, and holding the relevant institutions responsible for water management to account.

This publication brings together the journeys of ten such youth leaders. Each story stands on its own, yet together they form a collective voice calling for dignity, justice, and the recognition of water as a fundamental right. As this publication reaches your hands, we hope it carries the determination, hope, and courage of the youth whose stories it holds. These pages belong to them and to the communities they represent. May their journeys inspire you to listen more closely to frontline voices, support youth-led action, and continue pushing for a better future.

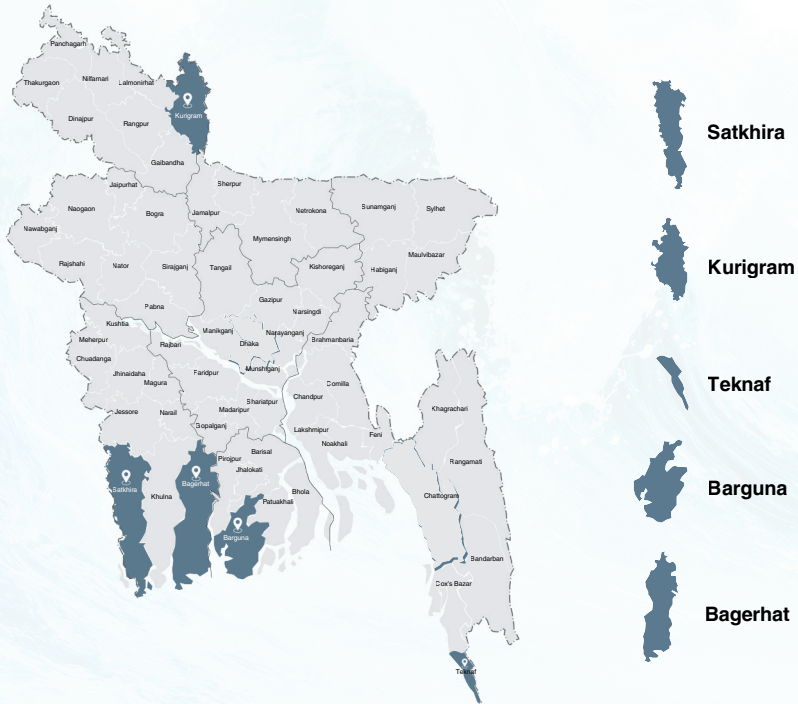
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Water Heroes Across Bangladesh



Featuring Our Water Heroes



Md. Al Imran Khan Rabby

Founder & President
Greenman



MD Mahfuz

Founder & President
Fight For Coastal
Rights & Justice



Arpita Mondal

Public Relationship
Coordinator
SHARUB Youth Team



Maruf Hossain

President
Srijoni Youth Group



SM Jannatul Naeem

Founder & President
SHARUB Youth Team



Jeba Tasnia

Volunteer
SHARUB Youth Team



Mohmmad Soheli

President
Activista Teknaf



Masud Rana

President
Betana Youth
Development Organization



Shahida Parvin

Executive Director
Janakallayan
Sangstha



Md. Maruf Hasan

Director
Janakallayan
Sangstha

A Voice for Water Justice

In Khesra Union of Tala, government-installed Pond Sand Filters (PSFs) had deteriorated and become unusable, compelling families to purchase water or resort to unsafe sources. Imran recognised that the problem extended beyond technical issues; it stemmed from a profound lack of accountability. Driven by eight years of environmental activism, Imran founded the youth-led organisation Greenman and launched the Joldhara initiative in early 2025.

In the climate-vulnerable coastal region of Satkhira, Md. Al Imran Khan Rabby's childhood was marked by a persistent struggle for safe drinking water. He closely witnessed how dysfunctional water systems betrayed the communities they were intended to serve.



Imran mobilised youth volunteers to document neglect through photography and household surveys, and organised courtyard meetings and water strikes to turn local frustration into a strategic movement. He engaged over 500 residents in a mass signature campaign, transforming a technical failure into a community-led demand for justice.

Name: Md. Al Imran Khan Rabby

Location: Tala, Satkhira

Theme: Youth-led Water Governance

Supported by training from Global Platform Bangladesh, he coordinated advocacy with local authorities and presented evidence to the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE). This led to the official approval and restoration of two long-abandoned Pond Sand Filters (PSFs), securing safe drinking water for more than 1,000 people.



Today, communities in Kheshra Union are no longer passive bystanders. The success of the Joldhara initiative has reduced the financial burden on poor families and established youth as recognised changemakers. Imran's journey shows that water action is not only about fixing infrastructure; it is about restoring community voice and ensuring that the right to safe water is upheld through transparency and collective leadership.

Turning Water Struggle into Community Power

Growing up in Rampal, a small coastal community near the Bay of Bengal, Md Mahfuz witnessed water injustice from an early age. Unsafe drinking water, extreme salinity, and constant river erosion shaped daily life. Children often fell ill from contaminated water, while farmers watched their croplands deteriorate. Mahfuz could not accept this reality as normal.

Driven by this lived experience, he founded Fight for Coastal Rights and Justice (FFCRJ) to take collective action. Since 2022, Mahfuz has been working on the frontline of community water rights, mobilising local youth and residents to demand safe drinking water and ensure sustainable embankments.

Name: MD Mahfuz

Location: Rampal, Bagerhat

Theme: Access to Safe Drinking Water



He organised awareness campaigns in schools and villages, held community dialogues, and engaged more than 500 people in initiatives focused on water safety and sustainable embankments. Mahfuz personally coordinated volunteers, ensured meaningful community participation, and advocated with local authorities to reflect grassroots voices. His efforts have led to improved access to safe drinking water for 272 families and strengthened local understanding of salinity and river erosion risks.



Today, communities in Rampal are more united, more proactive in reporting water-related issues, and more confident in standing up for their rights. Mahfuz's journey shows that water action is not only about infrastructure, but about justice, dignity, and empowering communities to secure their future.

Advocating for Every Drop: From Hardship to Human Right

In the coastal village of South Kadamtala in Satkhira, Arpita Mondal witnessed the paradox of being surrounded by water that was unfit to drink. Extreme salinity was a constant presence, causing skin diseases and serious health risks for all, particularly affecting women's sexual and reproductive health. Severe hair loss at such a young age due to highly saline water also had a profound impact on her confidence, and she knew she was not alone. These struggles compelled her to ask a vital question: is safe water merely a gift of nature, or is it a fundamental human right?

Driven by this question, Arpita joined the SHARUB Youth Team to fight for water justice. She soon realised that in her community, safe water was a commodity that had to be purchased and carried across miles of difficult terrain.



Name: Arpita Mondal

Location: Kadamtola, Satkhira

Theme: Youth-led Water Governance

To bridge the gap between suffering and policy, she organised *Pani'r Kotha* (Water Talk) sessions, mobilising local youth to identify and document the crisis. She did more than advocate; she brought the lived experiences of coastal women directly to local representatives. Despite social barriers and initial indifference, Arpita's evidence-based advocacy with the Union Parishad led to a historic achievement: the installation of a water treatment plant that now serves 600 families.



By providing safe water, Arpita's initiative has significantly reduced waterborne illnesses and eased the domestic burden on women and children. Now a member of the management committee, she ensures the facility's long-term sustainability. Her journey has transformed the community's mindset, shifting the perception of water from a daily struggle to a protected human right, and proving that youth leadership can secure a dignified future for an entire region.

Empowering Communities Against Erosion

Raised along the banks of the Dharla River in Phulbari, Maruf Hossain gained an early understanding that water can both nurture life and bring devastation. In his community, river erosion was not merely a changing landscape; it was a relentless threat that claimed homes, agricultural land, and dreams.

He witnessed the plight of the people of Char Gorok Mondop, an already vulnerable riparian area that deteriorated into a deeper crisis, where nearly 500 families were affected by the encroaching river. Observing neighbours displaced and livelihoods disrupted, Maruf resolved not to accept such suffering. Guided by this lived reality, he founded the Srijoni Youth Group to take collective action.

Name: Maruf Hossain

Location: Phulbari, Kurigram

Theme: Sustainable Embankment



Since 2020, Maruf has led sustained community advocacy, reaching a turning point in 2025 when he mobilised a mass movement demanding a sustainable embankment. Through signature campaigns, digital outreach, community dialogues, and rallies, he engaged over 5,000 people and brought Phulbari's struggle into the national spotlight.



His continued advocacy with the Bangladesh Water Development Board led to the emergency placement of 12,000 geo-bags and secured public commitments from political leaders to prioritise a permanent embankment. Today, communities in Phulbari stand more united and resilient. No longer silent victims of erosion, they are now informed advocates, ready to hold authorities to account. Maruf's journey reminds us that water action is not only about engineering solutions; it is about justice, collective voice, and a community's determination to protect its future.

Reclaiming the People's Water: A Victory for Coastal Communities

In the cyclone-prone coastal region of Shyamnagar, water is more than a resource; it is a struggle for survival. For years, SM Jannatul Naeem watched as the community's lifeline was systematically taken away. Forty government ponds and ten vital canals intended for public use were leased to private individuals for commercial fish farming, leaving over 15,000 families without access to safe drinking water. He saw women walking three kilometres every day to buy water they could not afford, with their health and dignity declining with every step.



Naeem knew that without reclaiming these public commons, the community had no future. Driven by this injustice, Jannatul founded the SHARUB Youth Team and launched a powerful advocacy movement in 2023.

Name: SM Jannatul Naeem

Location: Shyamnagar, Satkhira

Theme: Access to Safe Drinking Water

Supported by training and strategic guidance from the Global Organising and Leadership Development (GOLD) initiative, Jannatul mobilised over 300 youth volunteers to lead a coordinated campaign for improved water governance. They collected field data, organised Water Dialogues, and held a 'Run for Water' marathon, transforming a local grievance into structured advocacy with the District Council and the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE).



In June 2025, his sustained engagement with government officials led to a historic achievement: the cancellation of leases on 40 ponds and 10 canals, reopening them for public use, alongside approval for a re-excavation project starting in 2026 to secure water for 15,000 families. Today, communities have reclaimed their water, proving that courageous and strategic youth leadership can restore shared rights and dignity.

Empowering the Vulnerable: Bridging the Gap in Water Access

Along the coast of Shyamnagar, 18-year-old Jeba Tasnia saw how unsafe water, laden with arsenic and bacteria, shaped the daily struggles of her community. These unsafe sources led to chronic illnesses that disproportionately affected women, children, and older people. As a young woman with a disability in a society that often overlooks the needs of persons with disabilities, Jeba faced immense barriers, yet she was determined to prove that her physical challenges would not limit her role in securing water justice for the most vulnerable.

Jeba joined the SHARUB Youth Team as a volunteer, spending two years on the frontline of water governance. She navigated complex bureaucratic delays and a lack of local coordination to advocate for more inclusive systems.

Name: Jeba Tasnia

Location: Nakipur, Shyamnagar, Satkhira

Theme: Access to Safe Drinking Water



Through community awareness programmes and training neighbours in safe water storage, she transformed local perceptions of water management. Her leadership bridged the gap between marginalised residents and essential services, successfully advocating for rainwater harvesting and the repair of local drainage systems. Her intervention has been transformative, bringing water sources closer to home and freeing women from the gruelling burden of long-distance travel.



Today, the community in Nakipur stands more united, with daily life significantly improved for older people and persons with disabilities. Jeba's journey is a powerful testament that leadership knows no physical limits, proving that inclusive water action can dismantle social stigma and create a resilient, equitable future for all.

From Water Scarcity to Sustainable Solutions

In the marginalised communities of Jaliyapara and Rajarchora, safe drinking water was once a luxury. Mohammad Sohel grew up watching mothers trek long distances to collect contaminated water, while waterborne diseases remained a constant threat to families. Driven by these lived experiences, Sohel stepped up as President of Aktivista Teknaf to bridge the gap between community suffering and administrative action.

In early 2025, Sohel launched an evidence-based advocacy campaign. He organised focus group discussions with 120 residents and prepared detailed reports on the health crisis to mobilise local authorities.



Name: Mohmmad Sohel

Location: Damadamia, Teknaf

Theme: Youth-led Water Governance

Despite initial community mistrust and slow bureaucratic responses, his team of youth volunteers persisted, turning grassroots evidence into political pressure.

His leadership culminated in a historic achievement: the installation of two high-capacity water purification plants in April 2025. These plants now provide 20,000 litres of safe drinking water daily, serving 1,000 families and approximately 5,000 people.



Today, the community has been transformed. Waterborne illnesses have visibly decreased, and women have reclaimed hours of their day previously lost to water collection. Soheli's journey proves that when young people combine patience with data and collective action, they can secure the health, dignity, and future of an entire community.

From Salt to Safety: Reclaiming Water Rights in Satkhira

Born in a coastal village in Satkhira, Masud Rana learned early what water injustice looks like. In a place where groundwater is poisoned by arsenic and surface water turns saline, even a single glass of safe drinking water felt uncertain. He watched women walk for hours under the burning sun and saw children fall ill from diseases that clean water could have prevented.

For Masud, polluted rivers and water scarcity were not distant environmental problems; rather, they were daily threats to his community's dignity and survival. Moved by this reality, Masud founded the Betna Youth Development Organization in 2022 to turn shared suffering into collective action.

Over the past three years, as its President, he has led practical water security solutions, establishing a Mini Reverse Osmosis (RO) Plant and introducing a motor-van distribution system to deliver affordable clean water to the most marginalised families.

Name: Masud Rana

Location: Shallye, Brahmarajpur, Satkhira

Theme: Youth-led Water Governance



Through his Jaladhar Bachao movement, Masud mobilised over 500 community members and 40 youth volunteers in awareness campaigns and pond restoration efforts.



His work has led to a 40 per cent reduction in waterborne diseases and protected three community ponds from illegal encroachment. Today, nearly 1,000 people are engaged, farmers are raising their voices for their water rights, and hope is returning. Masud's journey shows how youth leadership and collective courage can defend water as a shared public resource and restore life to communities on the frontlines of the effects of climate change.

Advocating for Every Drop: Restoring Health and Dignity

Life in coastal Kaliganj taught Shahida Parvin a hard truth: the absence of safe water slowly breaks a community, one illness and one exhausting journey at a time. For generations, women and children were forced to trek long distances for contaminated water, labour that stole time from education and economic productivity. Recognising that Kaliganj could not thrive without water justice, Shahida stepped up as Executive Director of Janakallayan Sangstha to pioneer a community-led governance model that bridges the gap between scarcity and health.

Over the past two years, Shahida has shifted the focus from merely providing resources to mobilising people, training 35 youth volunteers and 30 local women as ‘water leaders’.

She personally coordinated advocacy efforts that reached over 300 residents, including teachers and religious leaders, successfully dismantling deep-seated myths about water purification through



Name: Shahida Parvin

Location: Kaliganj, Satkhira

Theme: Youth-led Water Governance

courtyard meetings and school programmes. Her leadership was instrumental in ensuring that women, who bear the primary burden of water collection, were given a mandatory seat at the decision-making table to develop practical solutions.



The impact has been transformative for over 200 direct participants, with a rise in safe water usage leading to a visible decline in waterborne illnesses and medical expenses. Most significantly, the initiative has reclaimed precious hours for women and children, allowing for regular school attendance and new economic opportunities. Today, Shahida's journey proves that when a community is empowered to manage its own resources, water becomes a foundation for health, equality, and long-term resilience.

Reclaiming the Commons: Restoring the Right to Water

In Kaliganj, Md. Maruf Hasan grew up hearing stories of a 'blessed' government pond that once provided healing water to his community. However, over eight years, political influence and illegal encroachment turned this lifeline into a contaminated wasteland. Maruf watched as his neighbours, already struggling with poverty, were forced to spend over BDT 1,200 a month to buy water from miles away.

Driven by this injustice, he vowed to return these public water bodies to the people. In 2022, Maruf joined Janakallayan Sangstha and transformed his vow into a mass movement through ActionAid's Global Organising and Leadership Development (GOLD) initiative.

Name: Md. Maruf Hasan

Location: Kaliganj, Satkhira

Theme: Youth-led Water Governance and Water Rights



He mobilised over 40,000 people, including students and local leaders, to demand the release of government ponds from private control. He personally coordinated high-level advocacy, leading delegations to the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) and engaging directly with the Chief Engineer of the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) and the Cabinet Secretary to end the commercial leasing of public water sources.



His leadership secured a historic achievement: the local administration announced that the Upazila Climate Fund would be used to restore all government ponds for public use. The District Council further pledged to stop all future private leasing of these water bodies. Today, thousands of families are on the verge of gaining free access to safe water. Maruf's journey proves that by combining heritage stories with collective action, young people can reclaim dignity and vital resources for an entire region.

Voices for the Water

“ লবণ জলে,
জীবন জ্বলে

“ পানি পণ্য নয়,
অধিকার

“ চারিদিকে প্রচুর পানি,
নেই শুধু সুপেয় পানি

“ ন্যায্য পানি,
ন্যায্য জীবন

“ পানির অধিকার
মানেই মানবাধিকার

“ পানি চাই বাঁচার জন্য,
লবণ নয় মরার জন্য

“ নদী আছে,
কিন্তু মিষ্টি পানি নেই

“ লবণাক্ততা কমাও
জীবন বাঁচাও

“ নিরাপদ পানি মানবাধিকার
—সাতক্ষীরার দাবি আজ

“ উপকূলের কান্না,
শুনতে কি পান না?

“ জলবায়ু সংকটে সাতক্ষীরার
—পানির ন্যায্যতা চাই

“ সমুদ্রের লবণ গ্রামে কেন?

“ লবণ নয়,
জীবন চাই


“ সরকারি সেবায়
সুপেয় পানি চাই

“ পানি আনতেই
নারীর জীবন শেষ


“ পানি দাও,
প্রতিশ্রুতি নয়


“ জল আছে, কিন্তু পানযোগ্য
নেই—এ কেমন উন্নয়ন




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