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A Positive Role of Standing Committees to improve the service delivery at grassroots

The roles of standing committees in Union Parishad are crucial, important and significant to improve the service delivery at grassroots level. Basically Union Parishad is a service delivery organization though its efficiency is completely unknown to the general people. Apart from all the roles of Union Parishad, making standing committees more effective and stronger should be one of the paramount criteria today to promote transparency and accountability to people. It will also assist UP to make them more participatory and democratic in management and decision making process.

But the scenario of Union Parishad is not very friendly on the question of effectiveness of standing committees. Most of the Union Parishads made it for official purpose, but practically their implication is not seen anywhere.

People's Reporting Centre (PRC) project of Democracywatch took the challenge and started working to form standing committees with Union Parishads in 28 unions in Bangladesh. They usually invite the members of standing committees to organize regular meetings among themselves to address the problems in their locality and find out the means and ways to resolve the problems in a structured manner.

Basically in its first meeting in each year Union Parishads have to consider Standing Committees for the various functional areas. Each UP will have 13 standing committees. Democracywatch took only Education, Health, Agriculture and Law and Order Committees and planned to activate them in a democratic manner. These members of the standing committee will also monitor the performance of different organization and produce public statement/report to improve the situation. Apart from that Democracywatch also inspired members of standing committees to make them get involved in development work at their locality. This approach is highly appreciated by local people and they are also taking it as a challenge and have started their motivational work.

Basically a standing committee will elect one of its members as its chairman. The committee will consist of not more than one third of the total members of the Union Parishad. The other criterion is that no member will, at the same time, be member of more than two committees. A Union Parishad may co-opt a person who is not a member of the parishad but who may in the opinion of the parishad posse's special qualifications for serving in any standing committee as a non voting member.

The roles and functions of all these standing committees should be set by the Union Parishad, though People's Reporting Centre introduced these for the first time in these Union Parishads.

Democracywatch has already formed 42 standing committees at 28 unions. The target of Democracywatch is to form 112 standing committees by 2010 in 28 unions in Jessore, Dinajpur, Nilphamari and Gazipur. This should be mentioned that a significant number of citizens are involved in these committees to initiate them in a participatory manner to improve the service delivery at grassroots level.

Standing Committee members are usually oriented by Democracywatch on the roles and responsibilities of a standing committee. They are also sensitized on basic democracy and human rights issues to run this kind of project smoothly. After formation they maintain contact with Democracywatch local officials, and then in every three months they organize a meeting amongst themselves to identify the problems and find out the ways and means to resolve the problems. Meanwhile they are guided on how to make an action plan for resolving issues through dialogue with the Chairman or TNO or concerned authorities. On the other hand some members of the standing committees started a performance assessment by observation i.e. by observing activities and services offered by the Clinic, Hospital, School and other service delivery organizations to improve their services. They use a prescribed format and collect responses, pictures and use them to make immediate reports to the public. After that they send the report to the local daily newspapers, concerned authority and Democracywatch to make liaison with policy makers to improve the situation. Democracywatch also makes a bridge between local people and standing committee members to get the proper feedback regarding the issues raised or discovered.

Many political observers are critical about the logical ground to involve civil society organizations in UP's internal process. But it has been established today that civil society organizations like Democracywatch are in a process of involving the members of standing committees in development initiatives. Apart from this, the observers are also confused about the role of civil society in UPs. But still they have some roles and responsibilities to make Union Parishad more responsive and transparent. They can disseminate information, and share with each other the development process regarding the UPs; they can also work as a catalyst group to push some issues to Upazilla Development Coordination Committees. They can also liaise with local people to address the real issues.

What Standing Committees do at UP Level

Standing Committee on Agriculture:

Standing Committee members assess the Knowledge and technology known by the farmers of the locality, they also insist Block supervisors to assess the nature of supply of raw materials for agricultural production. Similarly they determine the flow and source of capital for agricultural production. Block supervisors also assess the nature of crop processing, management and facilitate the marketing strategy for the produced crops.

Standing Committee members also scrutinize the monthly work plan of Block supervisors at Singra, Bulakipur, Ghoraghat and Palsha of Ghoraghat Upazilla of Dinajpur. This process is making block supervisors more active and sincere on performing their daily jobs. Democracywatch feels that this process also ensures the credibility and transparency of block supervisor's work indeed. The PRC will activate others in their respective areas soon.

Health:

Members of the standing Committee activates health officers to get the regular status of EPI program, to know the sanitation behavior of the locality and source of safe drinking water. They also asses the Peoples Knowledge on ORS, determine the facilities and status of MCH and also asses the Breast feeding behavior.

The members of the standing committees also monitor regularly different Hospitals and Clinics. Members of the Standing Committees visited Ramnogor Health Complex at Jessore and made a report on it. This process helped them to develop their health complex gradually.

Education:

Members of the standing Committees activate Education Officer to improve the education system, logistic support, communication throughout the schools, determine the condition of different schools, activate the school management committees, improve the teachers quality, reduce the drop out children from school, increase the local contribution to the schools, develop the Infrastructure of the schools, Asses toilet facilities for male and female students and take necessary measures, determine the source and facilities of safe drinking water for students, improve the security conditions of the girl students and monitor the distribution of school books among students.

Democracywatch initiated the process and hopefully it would be a comprehensive monitoring system by the community for the first time in Bangladesh.

Some Challenges were found to improve the comprehensive monitoring system by the members of the Standing committees at field level. Firstly the members of the standing committees have their own profession so they are not very keen to do this work on a regular basis. Secondly the government or non-government service delivery organizations tried to disvalue the work done by the standing committee members. Thirdly Government has no scope to initiate public monitoring by the community in their policy so this information could not create much impact in the locality. Fourthly Some of UP representatives are not very helpful to do this kind of involvement.

Some recommendations have also been made by the community to run this work more smoothly. Firstly members of the civil society do not have any voting rights that they are not taking any role to stand by their opinions officially. Secondly the specific work should be mentioned in the UP ordinance. Thirdly a budgetary provision should be fixed up to run their activities democratically. Fourthly the activities of standing committees should be monitored on a regular basis to improve the situation.

People's Reporting Centre (PRC) of Democracywatch is working to ensure transparency and accountability at grassroots with the support of DANIDA. Standing Committee activation is one of the prime tasks to reach this goal. Democracywatch believes that these standing committee members will act as catalysts in the near future to improve the union Parishads as models of democracy.

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