

Boosting Bangladesh development arena

Mostafa Sohel

Citizen committees are the backbone of People's Reporting Centre (PRC) project of Democracywatch. The community selects with the assistance of the PRC people, who facilitate the whole process, some 10 to 12 local elite (teachers, doctors, lawyers, NGO activists, women leaders, farmers, community leaders, etcetera) who are well known and are non-political. Then the PRC local officials give the committee members formal training on rights and responsibilities. They are further trained extensively about the role of union parishads, local governance, structure of government, the role of UP representatives, accountability and transparency in the UP.

People's Reporting Centre (PRC) project of Democracywatch in collaboration with DANIDA worked to form citizen committees at six Union Parishads in four districts of Bangladesh.

The objective of forming the citizen committees is to mould a group of activists to act as catalysts by involving the people and gradually changing the way union parishads conduct their affairs and relate to the people. On a pilot basis, Democracywatch with the help of DANIDA-Human Rights and Good Governance Programme Support Unit has been working in 6 unions on this project. The unions are Fathepur and Ramnagar of Jessore, Khogakhoribari of Nilphamari, Bason of Gazipur and Bulakipur and Singra of Dinajpur. The overall objective is to create a favourable environment for making the UPs more transparent and accountable in their operations and how they deliver services to the people.

Democracywatch formed citizen committees in each ward by careful selection of some respected community leaders/citizens who served as role models and could act as change agents. In total there are about 600 citizen committee members in all the Unions where PRC are working. Some of the citizen committee members are involved directly in the PRC project and are trying to improve the quality of UP services.

However, some of them hold other posts in different standing committees within the UP, Bazar Committees of UP, School committees, etcetera. They act basically as agents for bargaining and liaising with UP representatives and other concerned authorities to bring positive changes in their union.

Some functions of the Citizen Committee are holding monthly meetings to discuss different issues and problems in the UP, being present during different activities conducted by PRC, selecting the committee head from among themselves to act as a member of advocacy committee, have quarterly discussions among the members, bargaining with UP representatives and concerned authorities to bring positive changes, assist in different development activities initiated by UP, help PRC to fill up the report form to assess the performance of UP and help PRC to perform different tasks.

The four main activities of Citizen Committee are motivational activities, identifying issues and problems for the UPs, lobbying with policymakers and resolving problems.

Motivational Activities: The members of the citizen committee conducted huge motivational activities in their own union with PRC people. They are always trying to motivate people to

build an effective Union Parishad. The citizen committee members of these unions are doing this kind of work on a regular basis.

Identified issues and problems for UPs: The Citizen Committee identified key problems to be resolved by the UPs. Basically they took up the issues and are trying to discuss with other members and the UP chairman will most probably resolve the problem.

Lobbying with policymakers: The members of the citizen committee lobby with UP officials to have some problems addressed. They lobby to have a bridge built in every union.

Apart from this they also undertake development work within the union parishad. In this connection citizen committee selected issues and put pressure on Chairman and TNO to get proper results from the Union Parishad. Resolve problems: The members of the citizen committee in a participatory way resolve some problems prevailing in the Union Parishad.

The People's Reporting Centre (PRC) project of Democracywatch has already formed 54-citizen committees on the basis of discussions with community people. These people are respectable, credible and acceptable to all.

How they operate: During the implementation of the PRC project many training workshops were held to build the capacity of citizen committee members. As a consequence, the members of the citizen committees regularly consult with PRC people on the best way to carry out their roles and responsibilities within the UP.

They also participate in yard meetings and other events where they raise their voices and take action in their attempts to resolve any problem at the UP level. The members of the citizen committee meet once a month, while they meet the advocacy committee on quarterly basis. They also lobby with UP members, the chairman, the TNO and other UP government officials.

They are also actively involved in the process of UPs development work on a regular basis. PRC project is trying to sustain this process, by ensuring that the UPs deliver the best services to the people in a more transparent and accountable way.

The basic concerns of the citizen committee are Motivational training during yard meetings, discussion once in a month and once every quarter among themselves, identification of problems and concerns, making suggestions on how to solve those problems, discussion with UP representatives/officials and PRC people, assist in development works initiated by UP and participating in different training programmes of PRC.