

Empowering local governments through people's participation

Dr. Taiabur Rahman

Local government in Bangladesh is in a limbo. As a political institution to ensure public participation in development activities, local government (LG) is yet to take proper shape in Bangladesh. Since independence in 1971, successive governments have tried to use the local government system for their own political interest. No regime demonstrated its interest in reducing central control over rural local institutions. The party or regime in power has wanted to make the local government representatives their power base and manipulated the system to this end. Several abortive attempts have been made at decentralisation, but the system has remained highly centralised. Consequently, local bodies are characterised by weak administrative capacity, a limited financial and human resource base and little public participation.

Hence meaningful participation is not guaranteed by the decentralisation measures that have been adopted hitherto in Bangladesh. The literature on decentralisation indicates that formal local government structures may neither be the only nor the best way of ensuring popular participation.

Alternative innovative mechanisms developed and devised by NGOs can be of immense use in this regard.

Local government has regained its currency in recent time and bounced back with rejuvenated vigour and significance in the development discourse of Bangladesh. The Union Parishad (UP) is the only local government body that has been operating for decades with regular elections. However, the elected representatives at the Union Parishad level effectively remain subservient to the central government officials at the Upazilla level, and through this, to the district and national levels. With the most recent central government policy (based on an Act of the Parliament) to empower, Thana, (Upazila Nirbahi Officer) Executive Officers (TNOs) to play the critical role in nominating Gram Sarker members, the central government control will extend even to the lowest grassroots level. Yet another policy of allowing the Members of the Parliament to be directly involved in development work may impinge upon the power of the (future) Upazila level elected Chairman and members as well as the Union Parishad Chairman. There is still an unresolved debate on the issue. The introduction of the Gram Sarker may also cause tensions between the Gram Sarker Chief and the Union Parishad Chairman, in sharing power and responsibilities.

Against this backdrop, **Democracywatch, a human rights NGO in Bangladesh** with the financial support from DANIDA has come up with a project titled People's Resource Centre (PRC) that aims to bridge the

widening gap between the people and their representatives at the Union Parishad level and aspires to work as a positive catalyst towards making Union Parishad (UP) a pro-people and an effective institution. The organisation is working in 10 unions of Jessore, 10 unions in Nilphamari, four unions of Dinajpur and four unions of Gazipur. The vision of the project is to help create an enabling environment through which the credibility of UP representatives can be established and their accountability can be secured. The specific objective of PRC project are to set-up a monitoring system to assess the performance of the elected representatives at the UP level, increase awareness of the electorates about their rights/demands and ensure people's participation in local decision making process.

Major activities of PRC project include establishment of a PRC at every union in the project area, formation of ward-based citizen committees and union-based advocacy committee, orientation training of UP representatives about their duties and responsibilities and local governance and development issues, publicizing local burning issues through press conference, publication of posters, bulletin and leaflets, development of UP performance appraisal system, assistance to fast formation of standing committees and their activation and open budget declaration.

Local people's acquaintance with the system and functions of UPs in the project area has increased substantially over the last two years. A major portion of the respondents currently know that there are a number of standing committees at UPs which are to deal with different issues at the union council level. Majority of the respondents opined that they are more satisfied with the performance of their representatives now than earlier. They are being treated well by the UP functionaries.

Formation of citizens committees

UP representatives have welcomed PRC and are working together as partners in improving service delivery and ensuring citizen participation in development activities. Citizens' committees have become a motor of generating innovative development ideas and transmuted ideas into action. Advocacy committee which consists of senior leaders from citizen committees work as a pressure group on the union parishads(UPs) in resolving many problems encountered by the local people such as dispute mitigation, irregularities in distributing and allocating VGD, VGF and stipends and so on. 54 citizens' committees (nine from each union and one advocacy committee in each union) and 9 advocacy committees were formed in 6 unions under study. All these committees performed well and contributed significantly towards raising awareness of local people about their civic right and creating demands for service delivery. These committees also helped develop local leadership to whom the local people can turn to for help and committee members can lead them to the right direction. Now citizen voice against the irregularities that take place in

distribution of stipend among female students, in allocation and distribution of VGD, VGF, allowances for elderly and destitute. Consequently, corrupt practices by UP representative and government sub-unit officials have declined over the last two years. Committees have become oversight bodies to keep watching the activities and performance of UP representatives.

One of the notable achievements of this project is its publication of a UP manual which delineates major aspects of UPs such as the role and functions of UPs, the job description of UP representatives, financial management and project management of UPs, formation of standing committees and UP-UZ linkage. This has become a vital document which can be used as guidelines for conducting orientation training for the UP representatives even when the project is over. Democracywatch has catered orientation training to the UP representatives in the project areas and kept them abreast of their role and responsibilities.

Birth Registration

Birth registration is seen as a fundamental right for all children, and is part of the mandate of UP. Bringing people within a birth registration network can bring so many benefits. Due to Democracywatch's concerted campaign, number of people who have made birth registration at the UP in the project area has increased (from 806 in January 2003 to 7602 in July 2005) considerably. This initiative of registering all children will pave the way to introducing the resident registration system in UP eventually. Democracywatch can replicate Rajshahi City Corporation's model of electronic Birth Registration Information System (BRIS) through which it can register births on line, linking to a database that can be shared with other public agencies.

Participatory Budget Preparation and Open Budget Declaration.

Open budgets were declared by the UP chairmen of Ramnagor and Fatehpur union parishads of Jessor districts. Pre-budget sessions were conducted and people's participation in all levels of budget preparation was ensured. Pre-budget discussions were held and groundwork for open declaration of budget in the remaining unions is going in full swing.

Disclosure of personal Income and Assets of UP Representatives Before the people-

This exceptional event took place in four unions out of 6 unions in the project areas. Given the context of Bangladesh where MPs and ministers are reluctant and scared of disclosing personal and assets, this is a great achievement.

Problems and challenges

The benefits of engaging the public, particularly in terms of improving service delivery and decision-making is clearly recognized. However, some concerns remain about the time and resources required and about

motivating all sections of the community to become involved. The future of local government is tied to its capacity as a community leader to work alongside other agencies and its citizens in order to achieve social and economic benefits. Lack of resources, lack of time' and lack of interest among people are problems in implementing participation initiatives.

Local people might have experienced negative effects relating to public perceptions and managing public involvement. People are tired of listening to and getting themselves involved with development initiatives rendered by a large number of NGOs. Consulting the public may simply capture the views of dominant, but unrepresentative, groups too. We need to see whether the poor people's freedom to criticize the UP representatives does exist or not. Citizens may be fearful of harm if they dissent. Moreover, participation exercises can raise public expectations to the extent that the authority cannot meet. That might result into frustration and backlash.

UPs suffer from inadequate material and human resources. UP functionaries are entrusted with too many tasks to perform properly. Allowances of UP representatives are meager and union parishad lacks a full-fledged administrative set-up. NGOs like this can keep continuing its advocacy work along with other NGOs and stakeholders but it should keep pressing the government to bring this sort of policy change at the UP level to make maximum benefits out of the system and to make the UP more effective and pro-people.

PRC itself is an innovative idea that has already made substantial impacts on the lives of people in the project areas. It works as software, which helps cause mental revolution among the local development stakeholders. Directors (of partner organizations) interest, honesty and intensive involvement with the PRC were determining factors behind the success of this project. However, there remains room for rectification and improvement that has been pointed out earlier. The Project was implemented at a small scale in six unions of Bangladesh. The project can be extended to new UPs of Bangladesh for letting the people of other areas of the country reap the benefits of participatory development and decentralized governance by getting themselves revolved around PRC.

The writer is Chairperson, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka.