

# Citizen Committee of Democracywatch: a boost in the development arena in Bangladesh

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Peoples Reporting Centre (PRC) project of Democracywatch, an NGO in collaboration with DANIDA worked in 28 unions in 4 districts (Jessore, Dinajpur, Gazipur and Nilphamari) to make the union parishad more transparent and accountable. The project is helping the Union Parishad in preparing strategic planning, participatory management, transparency and accountability in all aspects and ensures community participation in development process. It focuses on building self-reliance within the community and developing interdependent relations between the different layers of government. It is eventually spawn a monitoring system on the activities which has been taken by the Union Parishad. The main strengths of this project are citizen committee members who have been selected from each ward. In every ward a number of 12 members are in the citizen committee to work as a catalyst to improve the situation of UPs. The main objective of forming the citizen committees was to mold a group of activists to act, as catalysts by involving the people and gradually change the way union parishad conducted their affairs and related to the people.

The overall objective was to create a favorable environment for making the UPs more transparent and accountable in their operations and how they delivered 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 3000 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 UP, Bazar Committees of UP, School committees etc. They act basically as agents for bargaining and liaising with UP representatives and other concerned authorities to bring positive changes in their union.

Basically Citizen Committees are the backbone of PRC project. The community selects some 10 to 12 local elites (i.e. Teacher, Doctor, Lawyer, NGO activist, Women leader, Farmer, Community leader e.t.c) who are well known and are non-political through the assistance of the PRC people who facilitate the whole process.

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.

### **Some Functions of the Citizen Committee**

- Monthly meetings to discuss different issues and problems of UP
- Quarterly discussions regarding the problems of UP
- Bargaining with UP representatives and concerned authorities to bring positive changes
- Assists in different development activities initiated by UP
- Evaluate the performance of UP

During the implementation of the 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 attempts to resolve any problems 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 as follows:

- Motivational training during yard meetings.
- Discussion once in a month and once in quarterly among them
- Identification of problems and concerns. Makes suggestions on how to solve those problems.
- Discussion with UP representatives/officials and general people
- Assists in development works initiated by UP
- Participates in different training programmes

## **Some interventions**

### **Citizen Committee (CC) has created a mechanism of participation and information dissemination;**

By the way of discussion, Democracywatch representatives asked Chairman of Fatepur Union, Jessore about his views and comments on the issue of role of Citizen Committee. He has answered with great satisfaction and said, 'most of the work load has been distributed to the Citizen Committee (CC) members from my responsibilities'. Now I am more transparent to the public on the issue of distribution and information dissemination. On the other hand CC members have been doing a good number of activities for the community such as tree plantation, sanitation and drainage clear from their volunteerism which inspired the other people of community as well as the political forces of union. Along with that the interaction between UP and CC has reduced the gap of information dissemination for the entire community. Now the people of union are not in mysterious situation about the development project including any kind of incentives. Thus the formation of CC has been enhanced the transparency and accountability of UP to the community people.

### **Citizen Committee practicing the culture of accountability and Transparency**

Md. Abdul Hye, members of CC of ward 5 of *Ramnogor* union of Jessore district told, we have been participated in the yard meeting for identifying the demand and expectation of general people. Then we talk with the UP representative on the identified problem for further action. Moreover we have been participated in the sharing meeting, which held at UP complex with active participation of general people and UP representatives. At the initial stage some people felt hesitation to say anything in front of chairman in sharing meeting. On the other hand, some people were expressed more than expectation that made the UP representative embraced. But after certain meeting the participants of local community people have been more constructive to discuss with the local level representatives. We have developed the culture of accountability claiming through exchanging views between UP and general people.

### **Formed Standing Committee on Education of UP at Ramnagar Union**

Mr Giasuddin, member of ward no.3, Ramnogor union and member of Citizen Committee was selected as a member of the standing committee on education last year. He is also a member of N.M.S High School Committee.

Mr Giasuddin is an active member of PRC and interacts with local people to change the traditional behavior of union parishad. He is involved in the UP standing committee to improve the situation of education. He intervenes for improvement of educational standards in Ramnagar Union.

## **Monitoring the performance of the school**

Citizen Committee of Fathepur Union of Jessore formed a guardian committee to oversee the performance of some schools management. The members of the Citizen Committee see the performance on a regular basis and use to report to UP representatives, Civil Society and local Media. After these interventions they get improved services from the schools.

## **Education Center for elderly people at Fathepur Union**

Formations of the citizen committees were key to success of Peoples Reporting Centre. The Citizen committees are doing tremendous work where motivation is only a glimpse of accomplishment. In Fathepur union of Jessore they have undertaken some activities, which are worth mentioning.

In ward 4 the citizen committee members felt that there was need for elderly people to get some basic education.

Therefore they designed a curriculum that included basic elements on democracy and human rights. The citizen committee members met on several occasions to deliberate on the way forward towards that initiative.

Due to financial constraints, this undertaking could only be achieved by getting a teacher to run the course on voluntary basis. Eventually they identified a person to take up that responsibility and on 22 June 2005 a female member of the citizen committee, Masuma Khatun took the initiative and opened an education center for old. Thereafter, the members of the citizen committee conducted a door-to-door campaign to enlist elderly people for this process. The response was very encouraging and now she is acting as a facilitator to improve the situation of adult education in that area. She is conducting classes twice a week with 22 adult students attending on regular basis.



Citizen Committee members initiated a Adult Education Centre at Fathepur Union in Jessore

## **Cultivation of Vegetables in Fathepur Union**

The Block supervisors in collaboration with the Citizen Committee members and PRC officials conducted campaign meetings to promote vegetable cultivation in Fathepur. It is noteworthy that the citizen committee members conducted massive awareness campaigns using their own resources.

As a result of these efforts, a large number of farmers have improved vegetable cultivation particularly in ward 8 where a group of farmers are now cultivating high quality vegetables on regular basis. This will ultimately improve the financial and food situation in the Union.

## Peoples Library

For a long time, people had expressed a need for a public library in Fathepur union. After deliberations, the citizen committee decided to set up a public library in the area.

As a tentative measure towards this initiative, a member of the Citizen Committee volunteered to set aside part of his building for that purpose at Sitarampur village in Ward 6 of Fathepur Union.

In support of this initiative, Democracywatch donated books, magazines and materials to the library. At present this library has become very popular among the local people.

## Pre budget discussion at Singra, Ramnagar, Bulakipur and Khogakhoribari

PRC local officers and the citizen committee have been working to have UP representatives to involve the people in discussing the budget preparation and declaration publicly. The aim is to make the process more accountable and transparent. Due to this reason they are now involving the local people in discussions during the preparation of the UP budget. This has been achieved in Singra, Ramnagar, Bulakipur and Khogakhoribari Union in this year.



*Pre Budget Session at Singra Union in Dinajpur*

## Participatory Budget in different Unions

Mr Kamal Ahmed, Ward no 2, Kaultia Union Parishad, Gazipur mentioned that he has never seen such type of participatory budgetary process in his life because he knew that the village police would come to house to house, and in most taxpayers have been reluctant to pay their taxes. On the other hand, local residents/citizens would not keen to know what their UP is doing because there was system of sharing information. Open budget opens their eyes, which has increased ownership to their UP activities particularly on planning and implementation. They have realized that development at grass root level through UP is not possible if they do not participate in open budget and planning.



*Participatory Open Budget declaration at Diara Union at Jessore*

Citizen Committee took initiatives to organize a number of 19 open budget sessions in last year in different unions where people's desires were main. People raised the issue on the

basis of their needs and make them understand that there is no alternate way except open budgeting. Side by side the local people were engaged to prepare their budget identifying their local problems at yard meeting on a regular basis.

## **Construction of Roads and Culverts in Unions**

Citizen committee members assisted in the construction of roads and culverts at different project areas. All the development initiatives are normally discussed in the yard meetings. Then PRC officers make a report, which is then submitted, to the concerned ward members. After that, the report is sent to Chairman of Upazilla Development CC for his information. The success of the PRC is mostly in the development work, which follows the reports from yard meetings. The recommendations from the yard meeting reports are translated into positive action within the project areas.



Members of Citizen Committee are assisting to prepare a road at Ramnagar Union with Chairman Afzal Hossain

## **The Four main activities of Citizen Committee**

- Motivational Activities
- Identifies issues and problems for the UPs
- Lobbying with policymakers.
- Resolves problems.

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

**2. 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.

**3. 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.

**4. Resolve problems:** The members of the citizen committee resolved some problems, existing in Union Parishad in a participatory way.

Basically citizen committees are working to promote dialogue, and consultations for development initiatives by Union Parishad. Citizen Committee act as catalysts to improve relations between the people and the union parishad.

Democracywatch thinks that this type of relationship between the citizen committee and UP representative will boost mutual benefit and understanding.

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