

Union Parishad

Transparent, Accountable Governance at Grassroots level

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The constitution of Bangladesh ensures fundamental rights for its citizen in line with Human Rights perspective and committed to ascertain good governance. Bangladesh has signed and ratified all core International convention and declarations, so there is a constitutional obligation of the Govt. to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.

Local government in Bangladesh today is weak, and especially so in rural areas. Local councils or Union Parishads have limited resources, little revenue raising authority, and almost no influence on how the central government uses its resources in their areas. Union Parishads are dominated by the District and sub district (Upazila) administrations, which exercise heavy-handed control, especially with regard to the use of funds and the hiring and disciplining of staff. Education, health, nutrition, family planning, irrigation, agricultural services, and main secondary roads are all managed directly by the central government officers. The low levels of fiscal decentralization are shown by the fact that local governments' share of the total public expenditure is estimated not to exceed 2 percent. The harsh impact of weak governance on the poor has made the poor rural people least able to fend for themselves, lacking both the resources and the knowledge to assert their rights.

Democracywatch- a leading NGO in Bangladesh has been implemented 2 years pilot phase of the project (October, 2003 to December 2005) named People's Reporting Centre (PRC) with the support of DANIDA in selected 6 unions in the country. Key lessons of the pilot phase were; there are lack of democratic practices in decision making process in UP. Women members don't get equal respect and power to work. General people have no access to UP budgeting, planning and implementation process. UP office does not work properly, different standing committees of UP are ineffective. Performances of Village Court and Village Police are very poor and continuous rights violation is a common phenomenon. Birth and death registration activities are not working properly and Favouritism and nepotism in Union Parishad has make the UP isolated from the general people. So after completion of the piloting the organization achieved some enormous results to make UP more transparent and accountable.

Due to this reason Democracywatch again took the imitative and covers 28 unions in Jessore, Gazipur, Nilphamari and Dinajpur.

The main purpose of the present phase is to develop and support the major stakeholders and build constituencies to link micro issues with the macro level. PRC will give particular focus on creating accountability and transparency of Union Parishads. Most

strategic focus will be a clear motivation for the elected UP Chairmen, Members and Officials to make them transparent, catalyst Citizen Committee Members, CBOs, CSOs including media, awareness raising among the citizens at Union Level, mobilizing other stakeholders and initiating campaigns for ensuring people's participation in UP activities like budgeting, planning, implementation and monitoring. They will monitor role of UP and govt. officials in public service delivery management, handle law and order situation specially violence against women and children. The project will initiate policy formulation and research, review for finding out gaps in policies and practices and will initiate policy advocacy and lobbying to make the Union Parishads accountable, responsive and effective.

With a view to create future sustainability it is important that the local community is involved and develop a stake in the project. Creating demand for good governance through social mobilization with the local government to manage and effectively respond to this demand and improve its governance practices. Producing good examples in the form of improved methods, tools and guidelines for replication of the project activities and the coordinated and meaningful pressure of the citizen committee, community people and civil society organizations on Local Government and policy makers and their engagement in any kind of systematic monitoring of implementation of GOB commitments under different Human Rights obligations will make the public institutions and the political entities accountable and transparent.

The project will target Partner NGOs, women and men of different ages, belong to low-income families, particularly marginalized and prone to human rights violation from different ethnic groups, religious, able and disabled, LEB, Member of the Standing committee, LGI, local social & cultural activists, media personal, academia, clubs, charity organizations, libraries, businessmen group, trade union leaders, religious leaders, teacher's forums as civil society members. Among other stakeholder from GOB officials at UP, Thana, District level and Ministries at national level will be addressed.

The project aims to decrease the gap between the people and their Union Parishad (UP) representatives and function as a channel between the people and UP. Currently, people elect the UP members who should be delivering services to the people. However in practice there is little interaction between the UP members and their electorate and the peoples' voice is not always being heard. This project will help the UP in strategic planning, participatory management and community participation and assist in linking UPs with community groups such as local traditional leaders, councillors and officials, the private sector and representatives from women groups. It focuses on building self-reliance within the community, and developing interdependent relations between the different layers of government. It will eventually spawn a monitoring system on the activities of the Union Parishad.

Democracywatch believes that good governance can only be achieved through a strong local government with the contribution and participation of the local people. With a view to establish a society where people are able to exercise their democratic rights in all spheres of life irrespective of their socio-economic, cultural and political identity or

status the organization is working in this sector seriously. After the short journey of PRC, Democracywatch gained enormous experiences and learning, which are as follows:

- *Poor knowledge of the LEB, Citizen's Committee members, local civil society members and organizations, partner organizations on accountability and transparency and the National Policies on LGIs*

The Local elected Bodies (LEB), Citizen's Committee members, local civil society members and organizations, and general people do not have adequate knowledge on the LGIs, its operations, mandates, links with central government, its sources of power, budget, etc. They do not have information on PRSP, as well as how the issues are being projected in the MDG. Democracywatch can develop small booklet with explanation for mass awareness raising for LEB, citizen committees and other key stakeholders. It must be remembered that inadequate knowledge and information often become a critical factor in developing partnership.

- *Informal and/or personal vs. Institutional relationship with the LGIs*

Trough different case studies, FGDs, it was identified that in majority of the cases, the local NGOs, CBOs, CSOs, local elites, general citizens have developed an informal relationship with the LGIs through their interpersonal skills. Because of the lack of mandate or job description of the LGIs, the relationship is still not institutionalized. Without a well defined institutionalized relationship both the sustainability of the relation as well as accountability of the LGIs is difficult to achieve.

- *Non-existence of institutions (NGO, CBO, CSO) to monitor Union Parishad activities.*

In Bangladesh there is no institution to oversee the performance of Union Parishad. Few NGO, CBO and Civil society organizations are engaged in any kind of systematic monitoring of implementation of GOB commitments under different Human Rights obligations and holding the public institutions and the political entities accountable due inadequate capacity, poor internal accountability system and politically biasness. PRC can play vital role by creating favorable environment for people's participation to monitor the UP activities.

- *Complicated UP representatives, over empowered citizen committee members:*

Some of union parishad representatives are very complicated and they didn't like to introduce accountability and transparency at this level. Some of them are very uneducated so that they didn't understand the real essence of the project. But now we realize that if we introduce this system we have to be very patient and careful. So for the successful implementation of the project we should be friendlier with them and

build their capacity, motivate them by practical experiences and introducing them with best practices.

In the pilot phase citizen committee members received trainings, information, and exposure visit and became empowered. In some cases we found citizen committee members started bargaining with the LEB for getting personal advantages. They feel that they are involved with the NGOs who are prominent locally as well nationally. Even they want to utilize the advantages of being partners of reputed NGO and Donor agency. We feel the need of developing code of conducts for the CC in future phase.

- ***Lack of communication and sharing of information among NGOs, Citizen Committee, Govt. Officials at LGI, LEB and other stakeholders.***

It is not only the LGIs who do not share information with its community especially the NGOs and CBOs but the NGOs also seldom share program objectives, goals and other program related activities with the LGIs or with other stakeholders. As a result, this may not provide the LGIs to plan and budget for the activities and share articulately the initiatives in their consultation meetings with the concern authorities in advance. Nevertheless partner NGOs of Democracywatch can develop a briefing paper on the project activities and circulate these to the LGIs and other stakeholders.

As a vital part of the service delivery government officials of UP are not very enthusiastic. They always feel that they are not working under any chairman so they use to act according to their high officials. That's why sometimes it was very tough to get them in a meeting. So from next phase we have to increase number of programmes with government officials, which will definitely benefit the PRC project.

Democracywatch wants to make an effective local government where they will play a vital role regarding transparency and accountability. If the transparency of any union parishad will be ensured then there will be an option to create many development opportunities. Ramnogor Union and Khasimpur Union of Jessore, Singra Union of Dinajpur are going to be more transparent in near future. Democracywatch believes that they will be able to make all the union parishad (only working areas) more transparent and accountable in near future.

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