

FRIDAY, MARCH 16, 2007

Union Parishad polls

Need for good governance at grassroots level

Mostafa Sohel

Local government in Bangladesh today is weak, especially in rural areas. Local councils or Union Parishads (UPs) have limited resources. UPs 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 roads are all managed directly by the central government officers. The low level of fiscal decentralisation is evident by the fact that local governments' share of the total public expenditure is estimated not to exceed 2 per cent. The harsh impact of weak governance on the poor has made the poor rural people least able to fend for themselves, lacking both resources and knowledge to assert their rights.

Democracywatch, an NGO in Bangladesh, has implemented a two-year pilot phase of the project, starting from 2003 till 2005, named People's Reporting Centre (PRC) with the support of DANIDA in 6 selected unions in the country. Key lessons of the pilot phase learnt were as follows: 1. There is lack of democratic practice in decision making process in UP. 2. Women members do not get equal respect and power to work. 3. General people have no access to UP budgeting, planning and implementation process. 4. UP offices do not work properly, different standing committees of UP are ineffective. 5. Performances of Village Court and Village Police are very poor and continuous rights violation is a common phenomenon. 6. Birth and death registration activities are not working properly, and favouritism and nepotism in UPs have made the UP isolated from the general masses. So after completion of the piloting the organisation achieved some important results indicating the need for making UP transparent and accountable. Due to this reason Democracywatch again took the initiative and covered 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.

With a view to creating future sustainability it is important that the local community is involved and develop interest in the project. The goal was to create demand for good governance through social mobilisation in managing local government and to effectively respond to this demand and improve its governance practices. Its aim was to replicate good examples in the form of improved methods, tools and guidelines of the project activities and coordinate demands of the citizen committee, community people and civil society organisations on local government and policy makers and their engagement in any kind of systematic monitoring of implementation of government's commitments. The ultimate goal is to make these entities accountable and transparent.

The project aims at decreasing 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. In practice there is little interaction between the UP members and their electorate and the peoples' voice is not always heard. 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.

With a view to establishing 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 organisation is working in this sector seriously.

The local elected bodies (LEBs), citizens' committee members, local civil society members and organisations, and general people do not have adequate knowledge, its operations, mandates, links with central government, its sources of power, budget, etc.

In Bangladesh there is no institution to oversee the performance of UPs. Few NGOs and civil society organisations are engaged in any kind of systematic monitoring of implementation of the governments 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.

Some of UP representatives are found to be very complex in their attitude and they do not like accountability and transparency at this level. Some of them are uneducated so that they do not understand the real essence of the project. But now we realise 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 very friendly with them and build their capacity, motivate them by practical experiences and introduce them to good practices.

It was found that as a vital part of the service delivery government officials of UP are not enthusiastic. They always feel that they are not working under any chairman so they act as per the directives of their superior officials. These complicated problems shall have to be understood and solutions have to be found if the Government wants to see functional UPs.