



Policy Note



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Role of Mass Media in Facilitating Citizen Participation in Bangladesh Public Procurement

Public Procurement (PP) is perceived as a major function for any government. Through PP, a government looks to maximise public welfare by providing quality services and products, raising growth opportunities for the private sector and ensuring efficient spending of government money. Many developing countries have realised that a well-organised procurement system contributes to good governance by increasing confidence that public funds are well spent (Hunja 2003). In this regard, it is generally expected that third-party monitoring (TPM) of PP, especially monitoring by citizens might earn the trust and confidence of the people in government activities. Transparency International (TI) asserts that 'everyone-from individual citizens to high level government officials-can play a role in ensuring that the tax payers' money spent on procurement delivers good quality services at a fair economic cost for all' (TI 2010, p.01). It has been therefore argued over the years that TPM could be a viable solution for fighting irregularities in PP. Moreover, the role of citizen has been widely recognised in upholding transparency and accountability in PP process. Reportedly, compliance with any law or rules becomes easier when the concerned stakeholders are aware of the benefits and necessity of abiding by those provisions. Experiences show that the more the stakeholders are informed, the more the compliance level is improved. Therefore, now-a-days some countries (Philippines, Mexico, India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan) have started realising that stakeholders' (especially civil society, media and the public at large) engagement in the procurement process is very crucial (Simone and Shah 2012).

Citizen Participation in Public Procurement: Bangladesh Context

Now-a-days Citizen Engagement (CE) is taking place all around the world from small grassroot projects to global inter-governmental initiatives. Since effective procurement is to ensure value for money, therefore in order to best utilise public money and ensure the transparency and accountability of the process, CE in PP process is required. Government of any country carries out procurement by using citizens' money in order to provide services to citizens. Citizens therefore should have an obvious role in PP from needs assessment to contract implementation. Besides, as tax payers, people have the right to know how public money is being utilised. It is now widely recognised that civil society can have a crucial role in contributing to the transparency and integrity of PP processes. CE or Monitoring can take place at different stages such as, procurement planning, preparation, advertisement, pre-qualification, bid evaluation, award of contract, and contract implementation of the PP process.

Traditionally the process of PP of Bangladesh had exclusively been confined to the government procuring entities and the members of the private bidding community like contractors, suppliers and intellectual service providers since the British era. Mahmud (2003) mentions that in Bangladesh, local people's participation is limited because they are not directly involved in design, control or management of any development projects. In this regard Siddiqui (1994) opines that the bulk majority of the people particularly the poor and the

disadvantaged, enjoyed little or no scope for participation except in electing their representatives. In other words, there is very little scope of participation for common people in decision making and management of public works. Moreover, the stakeholders are not concerned about its quality and sustainability. Thus, participatory culture in Bangladesh has remained a distant reality. At the beginning of 1990s participatory governance has become a buzz word around the world. Nonetheless, in recent times the concept of CE in development programmes has been introduced through inclusive and participatory governance initiatives. Therefore, Bangladesh also did not remain untouched, albeit slowly, from the changes sweeping across the world. The provision of CE has also started in Bangladesh through donor driven project namely, Reaching Out of School Children and Rural Development Programmes. In line with this practice Government of Bangladesh (GoB) intends to introduce TPM in PP in order to make PP more transparent, participatory, efficient, effective and accountable. The idea of CE in PP in Bangladesh is mooted in the fourth component of the Public Procurement Reform Project-II titled "Communication, Behavioral Change and Social Accountability".

Why Media for Promoting Citizen Participation in Public Procurement?

Mass media by disseminating information creates space for diverse public views regarding socio-economic and political processes and increases people's scope for democratic participation (Hudock 2003; Besley *et al.* 2002) consequently, its role has become "larger than life" (Anam 2007). In Bangladesh media often sheds light on the government plans on purchases. Besides, government routinely briefs the press after every meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council. The media also keeps track of the outcome of any meeting of the Cabinet

Committee on Government Purchase and the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs. Moreover, news on government purchases or tender processes always gets published in daily newspapers (Debnath 2010). Thus, media may play multiple and crucial roles in creating awareness among local people about TPM programme by disseminating procurement related information. Barber (1969) describes knowledge as an important resource for evoking citizen participation (cited in Azlan *et al.* 2012). World Bank (2010) asserts that media sector can be an effective way to benefit the poor by enhancing their participation and dialogue. In a wide variety of contexts, media has a key role to play in informing individuals; providing an inclusive and critical platform for public dialogue and debate; stimulating interpersonal communication and ultimately, policy-making that benefit a greater number of people (OECD 2011). According to the agenda-setting theory of mass communication, media plays an important role in shaping public opinion. In brief, the mass media in the past was instrumental in bringing people awakening; in present it is becoming increasingly important in influencing and modeling the opinion of people relating to various matters of life (Vasile 2010). Thus media play a crucial role in creating the sense of community and promote sense of citizenship among citizens. Hence, media can promote CE in three ways such as, by disseminating procurement related information; educating citizen about procurement laws, rules and procedures and shaping their opinion regarding important procurement issues.

In order to formulate this policy note the author conducted Focused Group Discussion (FGD), took in-depth interview, did content analysis and reviewed pertinent literature for identifying the role of media in stimulating Citizen Engagement in Public Procurement process.

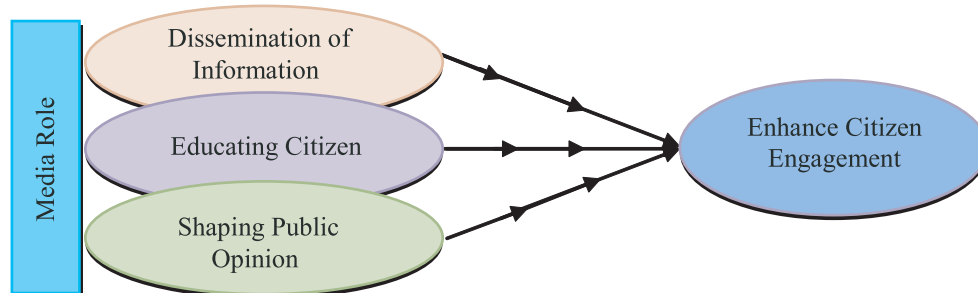


Figure 1: Relationship between media role and citizen engagement
Source: Author has developed this framework on the basis of different literature review.

Possible Media Role in the Context of Bangladesh

As democracy is functioning and the press is working in a relatively free environment in Bangladesh, the prospect of hearing citizens' voice through media is enormous. Now-a-days, due to the improvement of media communication system in Bangladesh, both urban and rural people by and large have access both to newspapers and television channels. Therefore, by improving the level of knowledge on procurement among the mass people, media may create scope for the civil society members and conscious citizens to play an effective and constructive role in PP. Ali (2006) asserts that, in Bangladesh, the print media has created a space for civil society representatives, mainly think-tanks, research organisations and NGOs to raise public awareness about their chosen issues and areas of work, and to engage in debates regarding socio-political concerns as well. In Bangladesh mass media are the prime channels of communicating information on PP to the public. Therefore, the onus lies with them to timely focus on an issue that is important to public life (Debnath 2010). A content analysis of mainstream newspapers shows that apart from promoting good governance and rule of law, media plays a significant role in every national event including curbing corruption, campaigning against acid violence, fostering gender equality and uncovering misdeed regarding environmental degradation, etc. Thus these kinds of activities have made media an effective agent of social change. In the light of the foregoing discussions the possible media roles for promoting CE in PP are discussed below.

1. Dissemination of Procurement Literature

Adequate access to relevant procurement information is one of the most important preconditions for procurement monitoring. It is widely believed that the degree to which people access, use and trust information, and how they communicate is increasingly enhancing their monitoring capacity. Besides, without reliable information, it would be impossible for citizens to use their rights effectively. There are a lot of opportunities for the mass media to get in touch with ordinary people, to collect information and to create sustainable change (UNDP and TI 2011). In PP, media can be a channel of dissemination of formal procurement information such as tender notices, award notices, etc. It is a medium from where people can get required information as different public procuring entities are required by law to publicise procurement information in mass media. The mass media, especially the print media, may play a critical role in informing the public about what is being purchased, how it is purchased, what are the standard criteria for purchasing that service or work

and what was the process of giving contract award etc. FGD participants opined that media can also highlight whether evaluation committee was qualified enough in terms of resources, skills, experiences, legality and other related matters. The media should aim at empowering mass people by providing the required project or procurement information to hold the responsible person accountable and make them responsive to local needs. Thus, adequate coverage of procurement issues in the national media will create an opportunity for the mass to know the mechanism of the procurement process. Hence, growing public consciousness and interest regarding the issue will make it possible to enhance CE in procurement practices.

2. Educate and Aware the People Regarding their Rights

Citizens with proper procurement knowledge may know how, where and when they can engage themselves in PP process. People with proper procurement knowledge will also be aware that their participation will break the monopoly of rent seeking groups on PP. As educating stakeholders with knowledge of Public Procurement Act (PPA) and Public Procurement Rules (PPR) is a big challenge in the context of Bangladesh, in this respect media can take up the role of filling the knowledge gap. Media like newspapers and television channels can play an educational and informational role and can educate people about procurement by publicising procurement rules-regulations, different methods and processes of PP. In order to do this mass media may also forge alliance with procuring entities, civil societies and other stakeholders for promoting 'procurement literacy' among people. In the regional conference on "Partnership Against Corruption" arranged by UNDP and TI in 2011, it had been discussed that free access to information has a great anti-corruption potential (e.g. in the field of PP, budgetary expenditures, and others). For this reason, media should proactively circulate information regarding RTI Act and people's right to use it. Media may make the mass people aware regarding access to information in the PP process and highlight its importance to hold the procuring agency accountable. Moreover, media, along with NGOs or research organisations can organise campaigns, rallies and other activities to strengthen the awareness regarding RTI act among the people. Moreover, it may inform people that it is the right of the people to know specific information related with any implementing project. It is expected that socially conscious citizens will demand details about the project duration, project cost, starting date, project completion date of their respective areas. Media may also work to make people aware of the public expenditures, yearly budgets and allocation of annual development programme for specific projects.

3. Shaping Public Opinion

As an influential part of daily life, media influences the public to a great extent. It is a voice of the voiceless and a great force in building the national consensus. Hadesian (2006) asserts that, media is the most powerful tool for the formation of public opinion in contemporary times. Now-a-days public opinion consequently becomes a key factor in the decision making process (Anam 2007). Voltmer (2010) mentions that media are expected to provide a forum where a broad range of voices - opposition parties, civil society actors, independent experts and ordinary citizens can express alternative views. Both print and electronic media should equally offer an opportunity to the mass people to present their visions, concern and opinions regarding PP in front of government to make choices about what needs to be purchased. Procurement related programs such as, talk-shows, street shows or public opinion shows provide a space for mass people to uphold their demands, express their objections and suggestions for improvements of PP process and debate for protecting public interest. While reporting on local level procurement issue, media may consult local elites, dwellers, civil society organisations, local government bodies and local

level people representatives to bring out the reflection of public opinions regarding any particular procurement issues or projects of that respective area. Besides, media may work to mobilise public opinion for their most popular projects and galvanise political will to fulfill the local demand. It can also arrange dialogues among different political parties and local people on procurement issues to address various local concerns related with PP. Hence, these kinds of activities create opportunities for the grassroots people to participate in PP. Sometimes local people fail to draw the attention of the concerned authorities regarding the procurement issues in their constituency. Mass media can point up their concerns to the appropriate authorities through its different programmes. At a first step, the media may mobilise public opinion and organise the concerns of those who would benefit from the respective project or process.

On the basis of the forgoing discussions a matrix has been developed in order to portray how media may influence Citizen Engagement in PP (See Table 1 below).


Major Procurement Stages	Media Role that can lead to 	Possible Citizen Engagement in PP
Needs assessment	<p>Broadcast reports on local needs.</p> <p>Special page, street shows and talk shows on local level procurement issues.</p> <p>Publish procuring entity's annual procurement plan.</p> <p>Circulate information (by local media) regarding needs assessment phase of local procurement entities' projects.</p>	<p>People's participation in needs assessment phase of PP.</p> <p>Make the mass people aware to point out specific need of their constituency.</p>
Advertisement	<p>Publicity of tender notice (description of what is to be purchased and the criteria for its evaluation)</p>	<p>Wider and equal opportunity to all to bid.</p>
Tender submission and processing	<p>Widely publish and broadcast prospective bidders' eligibility, importance of standard tender documents and contracting guidelines for mass people.</p> <p>News on pre-qualification, tender submission environment, integrity level of procurement officials (especially evaluation committee) etc.</p> <p>Publicity of procurement laws, rules, methods and processes among mass people widely.</p> <p>News and commentary on assessment process e.g. any deviation from standard practice by bidder or contractor or procuring entity.</p> <p>Publicity of notification of contract award</p>	<p>Citizen will be encouraged to play watchdog role in procurement process.</p> <p>Well informed citizen may demand for information related to bid evaluation committee, bidders and bidding evaluation process from procuring entity under auspices of RTI Act.</p>
Contract implementation	<p>Publicity of standard specifications of project implementation as contained in bid agreement.</p> <p>News and report on progress (strengths and weakness of implementation process) of projects.</p>	<p>Encouraging monitoring role of local people in contract implementation.</p>

Table 1: Media role and possible citizen engagement

Challenges for Media in Promoting Citizen Participation: Bangladesh Scenario

This study has found that the role of media in promoting CE in PP is not without challenges. Some participants of FGD considered the media coverage to be overly focused on scandals and to have too little positive procurement news. Terminologies and process of procurement also get misinterpreted due to lack of adequate idea on procurement issues. FGD participants (public officials) claimed that there are many reporters who publish procurement news without knowing right information or reality regarding the procurement process. Even it has been found that media circulates wrong information in many cases. It has also been found that sometimes reporters publish news in order to serve particular interest groups which creates barrier to project implementation. In many cases owners of the media houses become the bidder of particular project. In these cases, they may try to use their media in order to serve their own interest. Nevertheless, media professionals maintain liaison and continuous contact with different local government bodies in order to know about PP process of different sectors. This type of liaison sometimes jeopardise media's major role. Another problem raised by the participants of FGD is, there is no dedicated team within the media house to report on PP. In addition, another alarming finding of this study is the lack of investigative news on PP issue. Besides, media houses do not take care to give their staff proper training on investigative PP reporting. Furthermore, at the local level due to absence of Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU), the local level journalist cannot get the opportunity to clarify many complex issues regarding PP. As a consequence, PP related news has remained neglected by the media representatives hence its significance and importance keep out of attention from main stream media.

Strengthening Media and Way Forward

Though there are many challenges for media to play its roles, however, it can be strengthened by more internal transparency and a greater and more genuine commitment to hold them accountable. This study focuses on the following areas in order to make the media more effective and efficient in promoting CE in PP in Bangladesh.

1. Building Capacity

UNDP and TI (2011) mentioned that the media's main role is to get the public involved, which is a difficult task, particularly when a complex

investigative story needs to be presented in a manner that entices the public. Capacity development training is therefore needed to develop an efficient, modern and professional media corps for reporting such a technical issue like PP which will ultimately affect the nature of people's participation in PP process. Sometimes, press institutes, universities and media NGOs may offer this type of training for the media corps who is particularly assigned for reporting PP news. Donors can also allocate fund for training programmes or journalist exchange programmes particularly focused on PP. Each media house should take initiatives to develop highly skilled corps of journalists who will work extensively for enhancing citizen participation in PP. In a report OECD (2011) mentions that the complexities of modern PP can make this difficult, but many procurement authorities may invite media representatives to PP workshops and trainings, which enable journalists to understand and critically investigate the subject matter. There should be orientation training on RTI, PPA and PPR. Thus CPTU can organise seminars and workshops for media professional. All these types of trainings/workshops will assist media houses to cover pertinent procurement news with the interest of different stakeholders of the procurement process. The skilled media personnel would be able to publish reports on complex procurement issues in such ways that could be instrumental in promoting constructive discourses and debates between stakeholders and the government representatives.

2. Full Access to Information

Media's credibility as an effective institution of enhancing people's participation will be intensified if they can broadcast and disseminate required and authentic information among mass people. Since media has a huge responsibility of conveying PP relevant information to the common people therefore it can be effective only if it has access to a wide range of information. Though RTI act has been enacted by the government in 2009 the culture of sharing information is yet to develop in this part of the world. Government should therefore enforce RTI act fully so that media corps can easily get required information. Public procuring agencies and contractors should disclose information for media coverage. In PP, for instance, access to information means availability of adequate news regarding procurement including decisions taken and money spent. For promoting and sustaining people's meaningful participation in procurement process, media needs continuous access to data and information relevant with

procurement. Access to information should be provided to the media in line with the RTI act. Moreover, media people should have some basic ideas about the procurement cycle and they should move to the right places for information which will ensure more objective report without any bias.

3. Professionalism

As media is the main source of information and act as a bridge between the government and citizens therefore, the questions of its credibility should be remained unquestioned. Media reporters therefore should follow journalistic standards and professionalism while presenting facts and figures to their readers/viewers/listeners hence would be able to change people's mind set towards particular issue. For achieving professionalism media corps have to be very much conscious and possess the art of presenting any sensational news related to PP in a sophisticated reader friendly way. Professionalism also demands respect towards whistle blower and source of information. Maintain of accuracy of original information is equally important in this respect. A professional journalist will never disclose or publish any information pertaining to informants without their permission. Another aspect of professionalism in this respect is to ensure that any clarifications or rejoinders are placed in the exact spots where the original reports had been published. It is also very important to locate powers, interests, tactics and constraints of this profession. Professionalism also requires strong culture of intolerance to any form of malpractice. Every media house should avoid the unauthentic source of information. They should assess each and every information with accuracy

and precision with full of integrity. Since problems like information verification is often associated with media operations, it is very important for the media to base their stories on authentic sources of information.

4. Ownership and Functional Autonomy

Media independence is guaranteed if media houses are financially independence, free from political and corporate influence and irrational intervention of owners and operate in a democratic environment. As media is supposed to play the leading role to expose the irregularities of procurement process, therefore, it has to be transparent and accountable in its own activities beforehand. For functioning autonomously journalists should know how to negotiate with different actors (supply and demand sides, powerful and powerless actors) and how to choose neutral actors in PP domain. FGD participants remarked that, in Bangladesh, the problem is that some news houses has been grown up under state auspices and others belong to wealthy business groups so they cannot be truly independent, consequently end up as mouthpieces of those interest groups. Media coverage on corruption phenomenon of public procurement may discover the involvement of bureaucrats, politicians and their associates in it. Any type of alliance with political parties or other interested groups and political and financial dependence of media may create barriers to exposing those corruptions. Therefore, media should maintain ethical practices in its ownership and should be independent in its activity.

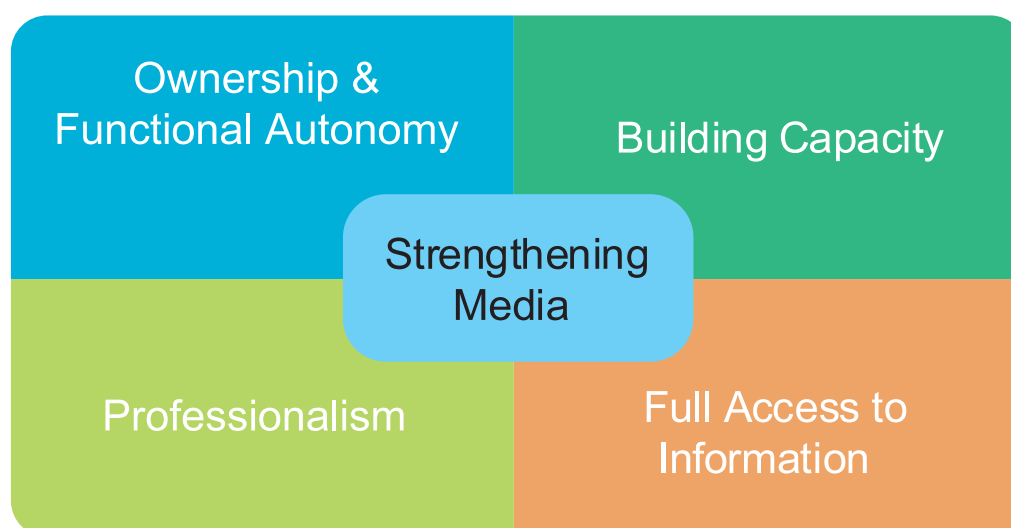


Figure 2: Policy recommendations for strengthening media in promoting citizen engagement in PP

Conclusion

The dilemma of the developing countries is that the majority of people are not fully aware of their basic rights and even if they know, they don't know how to exercise these rights. It is a reality that people tend to be apathetic and hesitant to speak up regarding government services and actions. Due to an inherent non-participatory culture in this subcontinent, people are usually not interested in interfering in government business. A complex issue like procurement generally stirs even less enthusiasm amongst common people. However, if the media can play an effective role, the procurement awareness will be increasing. Hence, an enabling environment could be created where people will feel at ease to talk about compliance with procurement processes and whether they are getting value for money of their taxes. Through the effective intervention of media, there is a great possibility of ensuring citizens' voluntary (or under any legal or pseudo-legal framework) engagement in PP and thereby improve the quality of PP. However, the growing sense of insecurity amongst the journalists is one of the major reasons for which media professionals do not give proper emphasis and focus on such a high-stake issue (PP) where the aggrieved people can harm on the reporting journalists for their financial losses. In this context, the government needs to take appropriate measures to protect those who work on establishing transparency and accountability in PP. Lastly, it should be borne in mind that though media is a crucial ally in providing information and generating public support, there should also be a framework for monitoring their work in order to ensure reporting standards, ethics and transparency. It is believed that public involvement in asking questions on the performance of procurement entities and bidder communities will make the procurement process more meaningful and enhance efficiency in overall procurement process. In this context, the RTI is a tool that the general public invoke quite easily. Hence, media may act as a catalyst to promote citizens involvement in the PP process to make this process more effective, transparent and ensure value for money.

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this publication are those of the Institute of Governance Studies (IGS), BRAC University and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government of Bangladesh.

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Author

Farhana Razzaque, Research Associate, Institute of Governance Studies, BRAC University, Dhaka.
Email: farhana.urbi@gmail.com



Public Private Stakeholders Committee

Public Procurement Reform Project-2
Central Procurement Technical Unit
IMED, Ministry of Planning
Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Dhaka-1207

Phone: +88-02-914 4252-3
Fax: +88-02-914 4250
Email: info@cptu.gov.bd
www.cptu.gov.bd

Institute of Governance Studies

BRAC University
SK CENTER (5th - 7th Floor), GP, Ja- 4,
TB Gate, Mohakhali, Dhaka 1212

Tel: +88-02-881 0306, 881 0320,
881 0326, 883 5303
Fax: +88 02 883 2542
Email: igs-info@bracu.ac.bd
www.igs-bracu.ac.bd