



## SHARIQUE: Local Governance Program in Rajshahi and Sunamganj

### Harnessing the Potentials of Good Governance at the Union Level

#### Introduction

A strong local government can make democracy truly functional and meaningful, and facilitate the development agenda and activities of a country. The policy framework of the Government of Bangladesh puts emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness in implementing rural development and poverty reduction programs. Along with the pursuit of traditional macro-growth strategy, the Government has pursued, with varying degrees of emphasis and success, a number of approaches and programs for rural development and poverty alleviation in Bangladesh.

The laws defining the mandates and the functions of the local government bodies suggests that all the local bodies (both rural and urban) are entrusted with a large number of functions and responsibilities relating to civic and community welfare as well as local development.<sup>1</sup> The 1983 Ordinance divided the functions of Union Parishads into five categories: civic, police and defence, revenue and general administration, development, and transferred functions. The adoption and implementation of development schemes included agriculture, forestry, fisheries, animal husbandry, education, health, cottage industries, communication, irrigation and flood protection as well as development of local resources. The Parishads were also entrusted to review the development activities of all agencies at the union level to make recommendation to the Upazila Parishads.

The roles and responsibilities of local government fall under two broad categories: delivering public goods efficiently and equitably, and to complement the functions of the central government. Local governance therefore includes the diverse objectives of vibrant, living, working and environmentally preserved self-governing communities.<sup>2</sup> However, evolution of decentralization in Bangladesh has been characterized by: domination by and complete dependence on central/national government; unrepresentative character; grossly inadequate mobilization of local resources; limited or lack of participation of the rural poor in the decentralized bodies; successive regimes' marginal and superficial commitment to devolution or decentralization in practice.<sup>3</sup> Although the Union Parishads were prescribed to perform various functions, their activities were confined to selected ones due to resource and other constraints.

#### The Prevailing Situation

Improved participatory local governance is essential for socio-economic development and poverty alleviation in rural Bangladesh. Good local governance is a democratic local governance which has been defined as 'meaningful authority devolved to local units of governance that are accessible to the local citizenry, who enjoy full political rights and liberty'.<sup>4</sup> Union Parishads in Bangladesh are known to be weak in terms of staffing and implementation capacity and of revenue collection performance, and are also subject to excessive control by central government which inhibits their autonomy. However, they are well-placed to identify and respond to local priorities, and have the potential to be made more accountable to their electorates.<sup>5</sup> A baseline study was conducted by SHARIQUE in 2006<sup>6</sup> to understand and document the pre-program situation in the selected UPs. The study investigated the situation in terms of supply and demand sides as well as the state of coordination and knowledge management aspects in those Unions. It was a detailed assessment of local capacities, constraints, priorities, and perceptions in the UPs.

### *The Supply Side*

Elected local government bodies have been formed and abolished at different levels at different times in the history of Bangladesh, largely for national political reasons. Local government bodies have tended to be perceived and exploited by national governments as agents for political mobilisation and consolidation rather than as autonomous, decentralized institutions. However, UPs have a continuity of existence as elected bodies and offer the greatest potential to become accountable bodies which respond to the development priorities of local people. Assessment of the supply side relates to a series of different aspects of the functioning of UPs: their development priorities, planning, resource mobilisation, capacity constraints, the role of women UP members, dispute resolution, and the transparency and accountability of UPs.

The study revealed relative inaccessibility of the Union Parishad to the general people, inefficiency in management and dissemination of information, and a lack of internal transparency - with decision-making, resource allocation and distribution more Chairmen-dominated than participatory. UP members play a limited role - mostly uninformed about and uninvolved in the development plan and budget - while women members remain unsure of their standing. The government rules and procedures provide for different committees that should improve UP functioning. However, in the majority of Unions there are no Standing Committees in place. Project Implementation Committees and Project Monitoring Committees - where constituted - are seldom functional. There is evidence of financial mismanagement - financial procedures are often not in line with government guidelines, and awarding of contracts biased. Furthermore, resource mobilization from the local sources was found to be a low priority area.

### *The Demand Side*

The Government has stressed its belief in democracy, decentralisation of power and responsibility, and peoples participation in all development activities as key elements in its strategy for enhancing the socio-economic conditions of the people and reducing poverty in Bangladesh. Increasing democratic decentralization will come with greater public participation in order to better address the over-riding national development objective of poverty alleviation and socio-economic development. Increased and more active participation by communities and civil society members in the local development initiatives will unite local communities in effectively voicing their demands and influencing the UPs' decision-making process. In placing emphasis on a broad area to understand the problems of the demand side - namely the prospects of CSOs/CBOs to play an enhanced role in the functioning of the UPs, the following issues came to light: there is not only a severe lack of information regarding the functioning of the UPs - thus limiting the intervention of CSOs/CBOs, but that these organizations lack capacity to raise their demands to the UPs and that furthermore the general people are not adequately organized to be able to voice their requirements to the UP.

### *Coordination*

NGOs, with substantial donor support, have emerged to play a major role in rural development in Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> They now have a substantial involvement in most areas of development activity, including activities such as provision of primary education and health care services which conventionally have been regarded as the responsibility of the Government. At local level there is very little coordination between NGOs and UPs, and a very considerable degree of mutual suspicion. However, UPs are expected to play a coordinating role in order to create a system of local accountability of the lower bureaucracy, and strengthen local government institutions. Effective coordination with other development actors working at the local levels and strengthening relations among all agents should further strengthen the efforts for local development.

Study findings showed that of the eleven relevant line agencies only the Department of Health and Family Planning and the Department of Agriculture have regular presence at the Union level. Furthermore, there exists a serious lack of coordination among the relevant line agencies and among the non-governmental and community-based organizations.

### *Knowledge Management*

Ideally, there should be information sharing within the Unions at all stages of the planning and decision-making process. Improved information sharing at different levels will ensure systems of knowledge management, capacity development of the project and partners, documentation and dissemination of best practices and lessons learnt, and finally, establishment of linkages with other LG initiatives and effective dissemination of their best practices. It was found in the study that there are no effective knowledge management systems in place at the grassroots level. However, there exist forums such as the Upazila coordination meeting that could serve as a platform for knowledge management.

A serious constraint on local government is its dependence on central government. The relationship between national and local government has been described as a 'clear patron-client relationship'.<sup>8</sup> The limited powers, functions and jurisdiction of local government are all delegated by central government, which retains a high degree of overall control. The extent of central control over local government is exacerbated by the limited nature of the resources available: central government provides staffing allocations, specifies duties, and controls the ability to tax and review budgets. The already limited autonomy and independence of local government is also increasingly being squeezed by national-level political intervention at the local level.<sup>9</sup>

The prevailing trend indicates that local governance is marred by a lack of capacity, transparency, accountability, participation and low standards of service delivery. However, there are many potentials that the current legal framework provides to local governance actors to develop and to harvest the promises of good local governance. This paper attempts to highlight the windows of opportunity that exist in harnessing the potentials of good governance at the Union level. It emphasizes measures that strengthen the roles of citizens as the principals and create incentives for government agents to comply with their mandates.

### **Opportunities for Good Governance**

Considering the prevailing situation, emphasis should be placed on facilitating the establishment of internal transparency and accountability mechanisms. Capacity building of UP Members would be an absolute necessity in order to reduce (if not end) control and dominance of the Chairmen. It is also imperative to ensure a proper financial management system. It would therefore be important to employ a variety of approaches to work at different levels.

Even with substantial limitations, UPs have the advantages of being long-established and representative, and because they serve small populations and geographic areas there is some inherent accountability - their activities cannot remain hidden from the constituents they represent. While elite factions exercise their influence, for their own advantage, with central as well as local bodies, that malpractice at UP level is on a relatively small scale. Most important, the ongoing local government reform process together with the continuing emergence of more democratic practices, is creating an institutional and political framework which offers the potential to develop UPs as more effective and accountable rural development institutions responsive to the needs and priorities of their constituents.

Official provisions exist for good systems and procedures to make the Union Parishad responsive to its beneficiaries, but most procedures are at best only paid lip service. Faced with pressures to meet prescribed conditions, the trend is to attempt superficial or token participation. Proper

compliance procedures and emphasis on both vertical and horizontal accountability will bring positive changes to this important public institution from being a private chamber of the Chairmen into which it has sadly reverted.

In our centralized system, the local government bodies are deprived of functions, functionaries, finances and freedom.<sup>10</sup> They are totally subservient to the bureaucracy and are now increasingly being controlled by Members of the Parliament. Furthermore their sources to generate funds locally are being increasingly curtailed. The UPs are demonstrably weak in terms of their planning, financial, administrative, implementation and management capacities. There is a need for greater democracy in the functioning of the UPs, and for greater accountability and transparency, particularly in terms of planning decisions, proper use of resources, and implementation performance. The present procedures for auditing of UP accounts, are inadequate. Efforts by UPs to operate and administer their affairs efficiently are further hampered by the poor standard of UP office facilities. Steps should be taken to ensure that the incentives and accountability framework faced by the local government is conducive to citizen-oriented service delivery. This will drastically reduce the corruption, waste and inefficiencies which permeate local governance.

## **Recommendations**

It is clear that the future prosperity of our country and well-being of our people depend on a vibrant local democracy. Achieving such vibrancy would require an aggressive program of decentralization and devolution of authority and resources. Experiences show that the closer the authorities and resources are to the people, the greater the benefits they bring for the society. Strengthening local government institutions would also require the transformation of conventional roles of the local government institutions so that they can be the change agents in the society.

On making local governments responsive and accountable to citizens, the core area of emphasis would be the creation of an incentive environment in the public sector with focus on service-delivery and bottom up accountability. A framework for local governance called "Citizen-centred Governance" has been put forward which embodies three basic principles: responsive governance, responsible governance, and accountable governance.<sup>11</sup> The distinguished features of such governance are: citizen empowerment through a rights-based approach, bottom-up accountability for results, and evaluation of government performance as the facilitator of a network of providers as citizens as consumers of public services.

### *The Supply Side*

Capacity of local government personnel is a serious constraint: the entire process of planning, budgeting, auditing and accounting in local bodies is weak due to inadequate personnel. The National Institute of Local Government (NILG), the officially designated training organisation, itself lacks capacity to provide the necessary quality of training or number of training spaces on courses. Even if used to full capacity, NILG would not be able to train even 15 per cent of all UP members over the next five years.<sup>12</sup> The need for a comprehensive training and orientation program has been widely noted. The elected UP members will have to develop an understanding of their roles and functions, and receive some skills training, if they are to perform effectively and to make an increased contribution to the overall development process. In this regard, concerted efforts should be made to:

- Develop the awareness of all members of the Union Parishads about their roles, responsibilities and rights, and how they can function more effectively as elected bodies

with all members playing a full role. Particular emphasis should be given to clarifying the role of the elected women members and ensuring their full and effective contribution.

- Provide training of UP elected representatives and Secretaries in specific operational and administrative procedures.
- Introduce procedures for greater accountability and transparency including approval of all key decisions by full meetings of the UPs, information-sharing on the decisions and activities of the UPs, and public meetings.
- Conduct regular auditing of all UP accounts.
- Provide training to allow UP members to prepare more comprehensive, area and resource-based plans which relate the prioritized needs to the different sources of funds available for development activities.
- Provide orientation and training in participatory rural appraisal and planning techniques.
- Develop a methodology for assessing the potential revenue base of a Union and set targets for revenue collection, and provide advisory support to the UPs in improving revenue mobilization performance.
- Provide capital support should also be provided to improve the office facilities (e.g. weather-proofing of office buildings, and provision basic office equipment and office furniture, and construction of public notice boards)

### *The Demand Side*

The decentralized development approach seeks to promote local level institutions to establish a people-centred development process under which the rural people would be able to design and participate in local development programs/projects by themselves for their own benefit. People's participation is a key element in the development process and the role of the government should be to create adequate institutional structure at the local level to facilitate meaningful participation in development, particularly by the rural poor. Raising awareness and building capacity of the demand side actors, facilitating their access to the UP and ensuring greater independence - particularly from the clutches of interfering MPs, should be among the foremost tasks. These can be achieved through:

- Promoting the role of civil society in government and educate citizens about ways in which they can participate.
- Initiating such processes that would enable the exchange of information at the local level (the local governance self-assessment exercises and the subsequent dissemination of the results can be seen as a start to share knowledge at this level).
- Introducing a transparent and participatory, bottom-up planning process which ensures that locally prioritized needs are reflected in the allocation of development resources and in particular that due recognition is given to the priorities of disadvantaged groups, including poor women.
- Disseminating information through NGOs/CBOs operating within the Unions including those working with disadvantaged groups.
- Encourage the NGOs/CBOs to support their groups to develop and present proposals for consideration by the UP.
- Facilitating consultative meetings with different community groups in the Ward, which should also be attended by the UP Ward member and the elected woman UP member who represents the Ward. At these meetings the participants can discuss their problems and needs, and identify and prioritize possible schemes using participatory rapid appraisal methods.

## *Coordination*

The presence of the relevant line agencies would contribute to the better functioning of the UPs. It is therefore important that initiatives be taken to increase the representation of line agencies at the UP level as it is perhaps the best placed local government actor to create a system of local accountability of the lower bureaucracy, and strengthen local government institutions. UPs should also be able to establish good coordinating mechanisms among the line agencies as well as CSOs and non-government organizations working in the UPs, not only to maximize the benefits of the development programs but also to increase efficient use of resources. A promising development is NGO capacity building and gender training programs designed to improve the general capacity of local government officials to do their jobs as well as to sensitize them towards the needs of women and the poor. These programs have enjoyed considerable early success.<sup>13</sup> BRAC's program of capacity development for UP officials was originally implemented as a pilot program for ADB, which covered more than 1600 UP officials in 147 unions; its impressive achievements led BRAC to adapt and scale up the donor-led intervention as part of its own social development programs.<sup>14</sup>

In this regard,:

- Demand should be created for establishment of the relevant Standing Committees and the Project Implementation Committees.
- Representation should be ensured of the project beneficiaries in the Project Implementation Committees.
- Mechanisms should be developed for UPs to work more effectively in partnership with government departments and local NGOs/CBOs in their service delivery activities.

## *Knowledge Management*

The Upazila Level Coordination meeting, convened by the UNO and held every month, has the potential to become an important forum of exchanging information and knowledge across the Unions within a Upazila. Currently the purpose of these meetings is to conduct a one-way flow of information. The government decisions and circulars are discussed in these meetings and updates of progress of different projects are reviewed. Steps should be taken to:

- Make effective this existing forum to perform the function of knowledge management at the local level.
- Introduce procedures for greater accountability and transparency including approval of all key decisions by full meetings of the UPs, information-sharing on the decisions and activities of the UPs, and public meetings.

## **Conclusion**

In Bangladesh, the process of decentralisation has been guided by three major concerns. First, the failure of the centralized approach to meet the needs and demands of the development imperatives and initiate rapid growth. Second, an increasing realization of the complexity of local issues and the inability of the central government structure to deal with such problems. Third, the need for people's participation to ensure effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of rural development efforts.

At present the UPs do not function in a fully effective manner as elected council bodies with executive responsibilities. The UP Chairman tends to play a dominant role, and many UP members are not fully aware of their functions, powers and responsibilities. The UPs also lack transparency, which in turn leads to lack of accountability to their constituents except as expressed through the ballot box every five years when UP elections are held. The elected UP

members will have to develop an understanding of their functions and responsibilities if they are to perform effectively. The leading role that the UPs will play will contribute to increasing their effectiveness, transparency and accountability through the introduction of the participatory planning process, the requirement for key decisions to be made at full meetings of the UP, the involvement of all UP members in overseeing the implementation of schemes, and the information sharing, monitoring and reporting procedures. The involvement of the UPs in planning, implementation and monitoring will contribute to their understanding of their role in better local governance. Supporting civil society to become a key force in local governance by promoting participation and demanding accountability will also contribute to a more conducive policy framework at the local level.

Bangladesh's political context has restricted the efficiency of local governments through frequent amendments and adjustments to the regulatory framework of local government, as well as a lack of functional autonomy. Establishing a stable structure of local government has been difficult and local governments struggle to formulate and implement participatory and locally-relevant development plans and service delivery in an environment of central control. A lack of financial and staffing capacities have exacerbated local government weaknesses. The recognition of structural and functional problems at the local level has led to a number of donor-initiated local government reform programs concentrating on performance-based funding allocations to encourage revenue and expenditure improvements and participatory development initiatives. Significant progress has been made in participation for the poor in rural areas. Local elections in rural areas have brought popular representation of female NGO members, representing a new socioeconomic class in elected local government officials.

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<sup>1</sup> Case Studies of Decentralization: Bangladesh (1997) Working paper prepared for SDA Technical Consultation on Decentralization (TCD) FAO HQ ROME 16-18 December 1997 by Mr. Mustafa K. Mujeri and Lisa S. Singh Director, and Assistant Program Officer, CIRDA Research Division Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific. Coordination - Mr. Wim Polman Regional Rural Development Officer FAO Regional Office for Asia and Pacific Bangkok, Thailand

<sup>2</sup> Shah, Anwar & Shah, Furhawn (2007) Citizen-centred Local Governance: Strategies to combat democratic deficits in *Development* 50(1), pp 72-80, Society for International Development

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed, Tofael and Niaz Ahmed Khan in *Banglapedia*

<sup>4</sup> Blair, H (2000) Participation and Accountability at the Periphery: Democratic Local Governance in Six Countries, in *World Development*, Vol 28 No.11

<sup>5</sup> Barwell, Ian et al (1998) Local Governance Development Project, Sirajganj District, Bangladesh

<sup>6</sup> Opel, Aftab (2007) The State of Local Governance in Rajshahi and Sunamganj: A study conducted in selected Unions, SHARIQUE, Local Governance Program in Rajshahi and Sunamganj, Dhaka

<sup>7</sup> An important early example is the 1996 Local Democracy Education Program funded by USAID, which in collaboration with The Asia Foundation, BRAC and other implementing NGOs conducted voter education programs and post-election strengthening of the UP. This was seen to have had a positive impact on the 1997 UP election, generating high voter turnout amongst both men and women from poor households and facilitating the election of NGO member candidates.

<sup>8</sup> Siddiqui, K (2006) *Local Governance in Bangladesh: Leading Issues and Major Challenges*, University Press Limited, Dhaka

<sup>9</sup> *State of Governance in Bangladesh 2006: Knowledge, Perceptions, Reality* (2006) Institute of Governance Studies, BRAC University, Dhaka.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.local-democracy.org>, The Hunger Project, Bangladesh

<sup>11</sup> Andrews, Matthew and Anwar Shah (2005) *Citizen-Centred Governance: A new approach to public sector reform*, in Anwar Shah (ed.) *Public Expenditure Analysis*, Washington DC, The World Bank,

<sup>12</sup> *State of Governance in Bangladesh 2006: Knowledge, Perceptions, Reality* (2006)

<sup>13</sup> ADB (2004) *Gender and Governance Issues in Local Government: Field Implementation of RETA Bangladesh*, Manila, Asian Development Bank

<sup>14</sup> BRAC (2004) *Gender and Good Governance Issues in Local Governance in Bangladesh: A Baseline Report of Extension Phase*, Dhaka: BRAC Research and Evaluation Division