Abstract

Despite several decentralization efforts by successive governments LG institutions have not yet emerged as autonomous and 'self-governing' units. As a result, the goal of achieving popular participation in the local decision-making process as well as development process has traditionally been very limited. The present study is an attempt to have a fresh look at the local governance status through assessing the level of people's participation in development process. The study also explores the actors and factors shaping participation as well as causes for non-participation. Because of limited time and resources, only one Upazila namely Belabo under Narsingdi district was selected. For the purpose of the study, both randomly selected respondents and purposively selected respondents like Upazila chiarman, govt. officials were interviewed. In addition, seven randomly selected development projects have also been studied extensively.

The study reveals some interesting findings. Though elected members of UPs, both male and female, equally participate in planning development projects, with the exception of one union out of four studied, participation of common people in the preparation stage of those projects is virtually absent. Project implementation committees are mainly official formalities in which the members are neither adequately consulted nor properly informed of the implementation status of the projects. Participation is very limited and often 'managed'. A democratic procedure is maintained in allocating the funds received for development projects. Despite formal meetings, funds are given to each elected member on the basis of size and population of the ward he or she hails from. The practice leaves nobody unsatisfied and helps UP chairmen avoid tussles as the elected members, who freely admitted that development projects for them are means of gaining political support as well as recovering election expenditures, are very keen to get projects.

Major findings of the study reveal that though political participation of the respondents is very high, they are mostly ignorant of the functions of local government. Participation

in project planning is as low as 5 percent while it rises to 30 percent in implementation stage. However, there is a pervasive feeling (91% of the total respondents) that development projects are generally non-participatory. Participation of the common people in the decision-making as well as development process is very low. However, one union shows some significant progresses; but participatory practices in the union are more results of personal initiatives of the UP chairman than any institutional development. Socio-economic backgrounds of the participants are found to be important factors. Participation is mostly limited to the socially, economically and politically powerful. In addition, patron-client relations, rent-seeking behavior of elected representatives also shape the nature of participation. Moreover, the structure of UPs and UPZ as LG institutions does not also encourage participation. The elected representatives seem to have established ties with the rural elites in sharing mutual benefits; a tacit system has been in operation, which keeps the poor and the marginalized outside the development process. Major policy initiatives are needed to avert the situation. Besides bringing transparency in the whole process and imparting trainings to the elected representatives as well as key stakeholders, efforts should also be taken to incorporate local institutions like local NGOs, social groups in the decision-making process. Evaluation of projects should also be done.