

Qualitative Action Research on Results and Learning of Strengthening Local Governance Project

[Under the Joint Partnership of Community Empowerment Program (CEP) of BRAC and the Hunger Project-Bangladesh)

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Major Findings

Under the joint partnership of Community Empowerment Program (CEP) of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and The Hunger Project-Bangladesh (THP-BD), a project entitled 'Strengthening Local Governance Project (SLGP)' has been implemented in targeted 61 Union Parishads (hereinafter UPs) in 14 Upazilas of 04 Districts under 03 Divisions during 2014-2015. The goal of the project was to help to make the "UPs", the elected Councils for governing groups of villages (hereinafter "Unions") more strong, effective, and people-centered. The statistical data related to project interventions has been used in this study from January 2014 - October 2015. Based on qualitative empirical data, interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the study makes a number of the following findings.

The first set of findings is that the capacity-building training, organized under the SLGP, has increased the extent to which UP Members understand the laws for UP governance under the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009 and the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2009. As a result of this intervention, the UPs have started to become more people-friendly and functional, as required under these statutes. The training has brought a positive change in the mind-set of UP Members resulting in improvement of the UPs' performance in all respects.

The second set of findings is about the effect of the SLGP on the villagers themselves. The activism and effectiveness of UPs cannot be enhanced by increasing their capacity alone. Thus, the UPs need a grassroots-level civil society in the Union, that can work both as helping hands to UPs, to mobilise people, and as watchdogs to ensure the UP's transparency and accountability. **This project has been effective in creating** a civil society from the ground up: by training a group of animators, women leaders and youth activists, who worked as an organized social force.

Due to the SLGP's interventions, community people, especially women, are acting as a pressure group, to hold their UPs accountable. SLGP-trained villagers are monitoring the implementation of UP decisions. They have been found quite vocal in preventing corruption in the service delivery process. They have encouraged their communities' people, including women, the poor, minorities, the physically challenged and marginalized people to participate in the governing processes of the UP, more specifically in "*Ward Shava*" and "*open budget*" meetings. As a result, UP Members are becoming compelled to grant the demands of common people.

More-accountable UPs, in turn, are leading to greater success in achieving MDGs. Moreover, the Union residents have become aware of their rights and responsibilities, problems of their society, and the importance of engaging themselves in income-generating activities. They consider the SLGP to be their "Light House". They are raising their voices, individually or collectively, to mobilize their communities' people, especially women. These mobilized citizens are then protected their rights [e.g. access to UP services such as Social Safety Nets (SSNs) and information] and preventing social and environmental evils (i.e., school drop-outs, child trafficking, dowry and so on). **These changes, in the UPs and in the mindset of the villagers themselves, have a positive impact from three perspectives.**

- ✓ **First**, they have increased the participation of community people in the process of governance of the Unions.
- ✓ **Second**, participation of people, especially women, in the decision-making process has made UP Members accountable for their actions.
- ✓ **Third**, the changes have advanced the process of pro-poor planning and budgeting. All of these effects have certainly helped to accelerate the process of establishment of good local governance.

Findings suggest that, the poor and disadvantaged people have become empowered. Thus, they are meeting their potential to make the UP governance pro-poor. As a result, these initiatives have not **only promoted inclusion of the community's** people in the governing process of the UP, but also **protected them from being harassed while getting services from the UP**.

Due to SLGP's intervention, the level of awareness (at the individual and group levels) of the community people, especially women, about their rights and social issues affecting their lives, has increased. **One effect of the increased awareness** among the villagers is an increase in **self-confidence that** has led them to feel competent to steer the development of their communities. Self-confidence has also made them self-reliant. They feel confident to engage them in income-generating activities to help their families.

Due to the SLGP intervention, the citizens have got many opportunities to get involved with their villages' governance. They can join in citizens' committees, advocacy workshops, *upazila* forum, or self-governing UP advocacy groups, where they get an opportunity to learn about who is doing what and how, what needs to be done in a given situation, the problems that they are confronted with and the solutions to those problems. As a result, **they consider each other trustworthy**. That leads the Union residents, particularly women, to protect their rights collectively.

Thus, SLGP, the partnership of BRAC-CEP and THP, has made village people, especially women, capable to lead the development of their communities. This has been a significant change in an elite-dominated society.

The third set of findings is related to the role of advocacy programs of the project. Advocacy workshops, at different levels, have strengthened coordination of the activities of the UP Members and facilitated communication between local and central government officials. Communication has been further facilitated as government officials, including Deputy Commissioners (DC) and Deputy Director Local Government (DDLG), were brought together with Non-Government Organisation (hereinafter NGO) officers, journalists, civil society representatives, and local government representatives in these workshops. There they discussed issues of strengthening local governance, transparency and accountability for service delivery. **Such exchanges of views have allowed the participants** to know who (among the UP Members) is doing what and how, the problems they are facing and how they are managing those problems.

Perhaps it is too early for the project to achieve its third objective, of 'policy advocacy' since it takes some time to materialize the results of the advocacy. In fact, it would be reasonable to wait some time for creating policy impact, as the policy should follow the practice. Thus, more interventions are needed in the coming years, before expecting the project to create policy impact.

Finally, the SLGP is a classic example of the community-led development model. Using this approach, the project has promoted sustainable socio-economic development at the local level. The project has strengthened participatory governance and fostered community-based initiatives throughout the program's areas of operation. SLGP has mobilized people's representatives and community people to plan and carry out different activities of the UP jointly, that have a positive impact on the living conditions of people in the rural areas.

World leaders adopted a resolution entitled "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", on September 25, 2015. This resolution will become Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter "SDGs") from January 1, 2016. The SDGs cannot be achieved by merely implementing projects on education, health and so on, without addressing all the challenges faced by a community: peace building, State building, human rights and good governance. This will obviously require a holistic, bottom-up 'community-led development' approach, encompassing a sustained process that enables women, men and youth to take control over their own lives. Such a process will require citizens to become active agents of change, grassroots organizations to let voices be heard, creation of vibrant, inclusive economies, and an effective, accountable local government system, all playing catalytic roles.

SLGP is such a community-led development approach that is capable of transforming rural society, by establishing good governance. Good governance will free society from many evils through its active change agents, called "animators", "youth leaders" and "women leaders".