



THE ROLE OF PEOPLE'S REPORTING CENTER (PRC) FOR STRENGTHENING LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A UNION PARISHAD PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Union Parishad (UP), a local government body, is struggling to provide expected public service at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. Studies have been conducted to understand the gap between the benefactors and the service providers. This study is conducted to understand the role of People's Reporting Centre (PRC) in strengthening two UP(s) of Dinajpur district. To do so, this study used a survey design to collect data from the stakeholders of the PRC. Simple random sampling was used to select 100 (50 from each union) respondents. Additionally, total 4 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used on a sub sample of 24 respondents (2 for each union with 6 participants). This study highlights knowledge about UP activities, level of participation in UP activities, knowledge about UP standing committees, roles and responsibilities of the UP representatives. The findings of the study explicated the gender disparity among the stakeholders of the PRC. The study found that 40% respondents are strongly satisfied with UP activities, additionally 77% respondents have mentioned the strong need for people's participation in UP activities. It is also visible from the FGDs that people are sometimes invited by the UP representatives in UP activities. The study revealed that knowledge, awareness, involvement in UP activities, and the relationship between people and the UP representatives have developed due to the initiation of PRC activities. Therefore, it lifts up the question whether these activities should be focused by the government as government's concern regarding Union Paishad will ensure the grassroots development in the country.

Key words: People's reporting center (PRC), union parishad (UP), UP activities, UP standing committee

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has a long and eventful tradition of local government. The structure and functions of local government have been evolved in consonance with socioeconomic and political transformation of the country. Nevertheless, the Bangladesh Constitution (Articles 9, 11, 59, and 60) made provisions for establishing local government as an inseparable organ of administering state affairs to safeguard democratic values and to secure economic and social justice. (Khan 2008). The emergence of local government as a distinct governmental unit is the outcome of several interacting factors- historical, ideological and administrative. Historically, local government obviously preceded national government. The human being first established their neighborhood management authority, i.e. the village government or town government, before they could even envisage a more remote authority such as the national government. Even after the rise of the nation-state, local governments continued to exist as units of national government performing functions of a local nature (Siddiqui 2005). Local government can play a vital role in safeguarding the local views. A compendious local authority, as distinct from a local office of a central government agency, can tailor its

services to meet local needs. The local office of a central government may have the same potential as local government for learning about local needs and problems, but it will remain functionally specific. A local government, whereas can decide priorities across a range of services to meet specific local needs (Hasan 2007). A strong and effective local government is one of the most important elements for ensuring quality of good governance and strengthening local government body. The local representation of a local body based on democratic ideas can promote the greater socio-economic emancipation of the people of the country (Khan 2014). In recent years, both internationally and nationally, the issue of governance has come to the center-stage of any discourse on development. This is more pronounced in the case of developing countries and Bangladesh is no exception to this. It has been observed that the development initiatives of the past decades in the national and more so local level could not achieve the desired results of bringing about qualitative changes in the lives especially of the people living in the rural areas. These development initiatives were mainly planned and implemented by the bureaucratic apparatus of the national government. Though some of them were

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also implemented at the initiatives of the local government (LG) institutions, but these initiatives were again subjected to the control of the bureaucracy (Hussain 2000). Over the years, a number of institutions, including government agencies, NGOs, civil society and development partners have been actively involved in strengthening the local governance process in Bangladesh. The NGOs work mainly at the local level (community and UPs) on awareness development, promotion of transparency and accountability and community participation. The civil society organizations, such as Bangladesh Union Parishes' Forum (BUPF) principally engage in policy advocacy for decentralization. The development partners sponsor a number of local governance projects implemented by the NGOs and have initiated, in partnership with the government of Bangladesh, some bigger pilot projects. Besides strengthening the local level (UP and communities), these projects aim to provide additional funds to UPs and strengthen the monitoring system of the government (Aubert 2006).

Therefore, the local government (Union Parishad) in Bangladesh plays an important role in initiating and implementing development programs. For many reasons, ineffective or poor governance at the local level has been cited as the most important one for failures of such development initiatives. Moreover, an effort has been made to identify the present focus of development assistance in the area of local level governance. However, in this study, it has been trying to identify the role of the non-government organization in making the most effective UP in Bangladesh. Democracywatch (A Non Government Organisation) had taken a project titled People's Reporting Centre (PRC) in the strengthening partnership between people and local elected bodies for better management of the Union Parishad in Bangladesh. However, this project worked from October 2003 to 2010 in cooperation with the Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA) in four districts (Jessore, Nilphamari, Gazipur and Dinajpur) in Bangladesh. The primary purpose of this study is to examine the role of the PRC in the Union Parishad. Keeping this view in mind the answer of the following questions is very needed-

- How is PRC promoting awareness for effective UP?
- To assess the role of PRC in promoting the service of UP.
- How PRC involve people's participation in UP activities and standing committees?
- How PRC decreases the gap between general people and their UP representatives?

ORIENTATION OF PEOPLE'S REPORTING CENTRE (PRC)

People's Reporting Centre (PRC) was the project of Democracywatch worked for strengthening local government from October 2003 to 2010 in cooperation with the Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA). Initially six Union Parishads (namely Bason, Fathepur, Ramnagar, Khogakharibari, Singra and Bulakipur) under the district of Gazipur, Jessore, Nilphamari and Dinajpur, were chosen as the operational area of the project. After the initial phase, PRC has worked through its local partner, namely SamajikUnnayanSangstha (SUS) of Gajipur, SwapnaShahajjaSangstha (SSS) of Jessore, Nilachal of Nilphamari and Project for Rural Area Development and Improvement of Poor People (PRADIP) of Dinajpur which covered 28 Union Parishad under the above mentioned districts. Peoples Reporting Centre (PRC) of Democracy Watch, funded by DANIDA-HRGG-PSU, contributed enormously to some of the positive achievements of the Union Parishad.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

A survey was designed to conduct the study at Singra and Bulakipur union in Dinajpur district of Bangladesh. The study area was purposively selected based on their degree of substantial development, as indicated by the awareness activities of PRC, developing cooperation among elected UP bodies, decreasing gap between general people and their UP representatives, and people's participation in UP standing committee. The respondents (18 years or above) who formed the sample belonged to the stakeholders of the PRC. Simple random sampling was used to select 100 (50 from each union) respondents. Additionally, a sub-sample of 24 respondents was selected for Focus Group Discussion (FGD). Four FGDs (2 for each Union, each group contained 6 participants) were organized. The aim of organizing FGD was to obtain an understanding of the underlying activities related to effective, accountable, and transparent union parishad and their awareness of PRC activities. The primary data were collected through face to face interview and the secondary data were collected from certain institutions, organizations, NGOs and other government agencies. A team of 4 interviewers collected the data. To do this, initially an interview schedule was prepared and a pre-test was conducted with a sample of 20 (10 for each union) respondents over a single week period. Eventually, an interview schedule was prepared. Finally, the raw data were compiled and cleaned to make it suitable for statistical analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data regarding the socio-economic profile of the PRC stakeholders were presented in Table 1 which

showed that there was an unequal distribution of the sample among the categories of sex of the respondents.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of socio-economic profile of the respondents (N = 100)

| Variable | Category of Variable | Total | Percentage |
|------------|----------------------|-------|------------|
| Sex | Male | 78 | 78.0 |
| | Female | 22 | 22.0 |
| | Primary | 24 | 24.0 |
| Education | Secondary | 33 | 33.0 |
| | S.S.C | 22 | 22.0 |
| | H.S.C | 14 | 14.0 |
| | Graduate | 7 | 7.0 |
| Occupation | Agriculture | 38 | 38.0 |
| | Business | 26 | 26.0 |
| | Teacher | 8 | 8.0 |
| | Doctor | 6 | 6.0 |
| | Service holder | 7 | 7.0 |
| | Housewife | 14 | 14.0 |
| | Member in UP | 16 | 16.0 |

In the study, 78% stakeholders of the PRC were male, which represents the gender disparity among the stakeholders of the PRC. Union Parishad (UP) is not only the platform for men, but at the same time it is a platform for women because in our country half of the population is constituted by women. Regarding educational attainment, the findings of the study shown that the greater part of the stakeholders (33%) had completed their secondary education and other considerable stakeholders (24%) had completed their primary education. The Majority (38%) of the respondents in the study was engaged with agriculture sector and a considerable number (26%) of the respondents were businessmen. Basically Union Parishad is a platform of common people, which can meet their demand in the local affair. But it is generally observed everywhere in the country that the people who possess lower stratum in the society are more engaged with Union Parishad for their various needs.

Table 2. Satisfaction and need of people's participation in UP activities

| Variables with category | Level of satisfaction and participation | | |
|---|---|------|------|
| | Strong | Less | No |
| Satisfaction about UP Activities | 40.0 | 51.0 | 9.0 |
| Need of people's participation in up Activities | 77.0 | 23.0 | 00.0 |

Table 2 represented that 40% respondents were strongly satisfied with UP activities, just over half (51 %) of respondents were less satisfied and only 9 % were not satisfied with UP activities. In spite of various shortcomings UP has to deal with multi-sectoral activities. Despite these shortcomings, PRC

was gradually able to run its activities successfully with the help of UP representatives and general people. Over the period of time, Union Parishad is not limited only to maintain law and order situation. Day by day the activities of the UP are expanding. Due to the expansion of UP activities, it is difficult to maintain its functions only by the UP representatives. Hence, people's participation becomes imperative day by day in UP activities. The survey showed that, 77% respondents agreed with a strong need of people's participation in UP activities. On the contrary, 23% expressed less need of people's participation and none of the respondents opined that people's participation in UP activities is needless. At the same time, it was found from the FGDs that people were sometimes invited by the UP representatives in UP activities. So, it is clearly apparent that the peoples' participation in UP activities is the demand of general people.

Local government is the institution which has a long history. People are more or less involved with Union Parishad at various times, but it is usually seen that the knowledge of general people about UP function is very poor. They only know some particular functions which basically UP perform. Actually, the UP functions have a vast field which generally people do not know. With the emergence of the PRC, people came to know about UP functions more efficiently than before.

Table 3. Knowledge, awareness and involvement in UP activities

| Variables with category | Time of involvement | | | |
|--|---------------------|------|-------------------|------|
| | Before PRC emerged | | After PRC emerged | |
| | Yes | No | Yes | No |
| Knowledge about UP Activities | 37.0 | 63.0 | 83.0 | 17.0 |
| Awareness about UP Activities | 24.0 | 83.0 | 76.0 | 24.0 |
| Involvement in UP Activities | 27.0 | 73.0 | 67.0 | 33.0 |
| Knowledge regarding UP's standing committee | 38.0 | 62.0 | 77.0 | 23.0 |
| Involvement in UP standing committees activities | 14.0 | 86.0 | 78.0 | 22.0 |
| Knowledge about different UP standing committee's activities | 18.0 | 82.0 | 63.0 | 37.0 |
| Knowledge about UP Budget | 36.0 | 64.0 | 89.0 | 11.0 |
| Participation in the UP budget session | 27.0 | 73.0 | 78.0 | 12.0 |
| Invitation by UP representatives in the budget session | 18.0 | 82.0 | 83.0 | 17.0 |
| Birth registration at | 42.0 | 58.0 | 93.0 | 7.0 |

Table 3 revealed a comparative scenario of the respondents' level of knowledge, awareness and involvement in UP activities before and after the emergence of PRC among the 100 respondents, while the near half (37.0%) of respondents had their knowledge about UP activities before the PRC emerged. On the other hand, this situation is totally different where it was found that 83% respondents had their knowledge about UP activities after PRC emerged. Regarding, the knowledge, where it was found that a vast number (83%) of respondents were ignorant of UP activities before the PRC emerged and just after PRC started its activities the scenario totally changed and number of ignorant respondents about UP activities decreased rapidly. People's awareness is a very tremendous factor to run UP activities. It is usually observed that people become aware about UP activities when they need something from UP or need assistance of UP and after fulfillment of their demand they are no more attentive to UP activities.

The local government bodies play an important role in the overall development of the country. The UP representatives, since the people elect them, play a very important role in delivering civic facilities (Siddiqui, 2005). Bangladesh is a developing country and since the post independence period, various development programmes have been taken by both government and non-government organizations and in these development programmes Union Parishad got the leading priority, as UP is now the lowest tier of local government. All of these development programmes are not possible to run by the UP representatives only. They need to invite the people in UP's activities. The findings of this study, regarding involvement in UP activities before the PRC emerged revealed that among the total number of stakeholders, the trivial number (27%) of respondents was involved with UP activities. While, after PRC emerged the involvement raises up to 67%.

The standing committee plays a vital role to ensure the implementation of UP activities. Besides these, various activities were initiated and implemented in the development program in UP. The UP chairman holds the power to constitute the standing committee. Usually, standing committee is formulated to regulate the specific activities. Standing committee concentrates on particular activities of UP on which UP does not concentrate in its general session. Each Union Parishad has 13 standing committees, among of these PRC worked with only 4 standing committees, namely- agriculture, health, education, and law and order. Regarding the knowledge about UP standing committee and its various activities, the Table 3 showed that only 38% stakeholders had the knowledge about various standing committees in UP. The respondents were asked those who had

knowledge about standing committee, how many standing committees existed in the Union Parishad and found very disappointing answer. The almost all respondents did not know that how many standing committees exist in a Union Parishad. Concerning knowledge about different UP standing committee's activities the study shown that the majority of stakeholders (82%) were unknown about different UP standing Committee activities. The survey also wanted to know about the contribution of PRC in UP standing committee and found that, 100% respondents who know about standing committee agreed with the statement that PRC had the contribution in UP standing committee and its activities.

Knowledge about UP budget, participation in budget session and invitation by UP councilor in budget session, the respondents were not actively related to all of these aspects before PRC emerged. However, all of these characteristics quickly changed after the operation of PRC activities in the study areas.

Article 7 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that every child has the right to a name, identity and nationality. Birth Registration (BR) is a first and a magnificent step in meeting child rights as it is the first official acknowledgement of the child's existence and the recognition of the child's status before the law. In Bangladesh, specifically for children, it has been realized that birth registration is very essential to secure children's rights. Birth registration is also essential for national planning and as a demographic base to build effective strategies (Chowdhury, n.d). The carrying out of the birth registration programme in UP was not up to the mark before the PRC initiate its activities, whereas near about half (42.0%) of respondents explained that the birth registration programme was not properly running in UP. However, this scenario has been changed through various activities of PRC in UP. According to Sultana (2006) as the low level of awareness amongst the general public was identified as one of the obstacles in realizing sensitization campaigns on the importance of BR will be conducted. Communication and advocacy materials such as posters, leaflets, and commemorative birth certificates will be produced and distributed, including audiovisual resources for mass media outlets. One of the key messages will be the time-bound activity of free birth registration until 2 July 2008. Priority will be given to children as registration release the right to a name, as well as providing a protective mechanism against exploitation and abuse.

Therefore, it is evident from the study that due to various activities of PRC, people were able to know about UP activities which helped them to come out from the negligence about UP activities and at the same time they became capable of developing their level of knowledge about UP activities.

Table 4. Reasons of unawareness, detachment and role of the PRC in UP standing committee

| Variables with category | Percentage % | Variables with category | Percentage % |
|--|--------------|--|--------------|
| Reasons of Unawareness about UP activities (N=83)* | | Reason for not participated in UP budget before PRC activities. (N=73)* | |
| Not aware of UP activities | 27.0 | Being unknown about UP's budget | 70.0 |
| Lack of good relation with UP representatives | 13.0 | Not being invited for participation in budget | 43.0 |
| Lack of knowledge about UP activities | 72.0 | For the absence of UP's budget | 54.0 |
| Lack of opportunity to know about UP activities | 24.0 | For not having any interest | 27.0 |
| Reasons for detachment in UP activities (N=73)* | | Contribution of PRC in takes part in UP budget session. (N=78)* | |
| Lack of knowledge about UP activities | 82.0 | PRC aware you about UP budget | 75.0 |
| Lack of interest about UP activities | 34.0 | PRC encourages you to participate in budget | 59.0 |
| Lack of opportunities in working UP activities | 41.0 | PRC states your role in budget | 40.0 |
| UP does not work perfectly | 24.0 | PRC states the way of solution of problem | 41.0 |
| Involvement of people in UP standing committee by PRC (N=78)* | | Contribution of PRC in birth registration in UP. (N=93)* | |
| Aware your role in committee | 38.0 | PRC explain the necessity of birth registration to UP representatives | 76.0 |
| Mention your importance in committee to mobilize UP activities | 55.0 | PRC advertises about birth registration in UP | 82.0 |
| Arrange meetings and canvas in different times | 49.0 | Discussing about birth registration in yard meeting | 61.0 |
| Encourage chairman to constitute the respective committee | 64.0 | discussing about birth registration in citizen committee | 68.0 |
| Necessity of PRC in other standing committee (N=78)* | | How the relationship developed between people and UP representatives? (N=100)* | |
| Necessity of other standing committee | 62.0 | The cordiality of UP representatives has increased | 70.0 |
| Other standing committee has a role to achieve whole Ups objective | 56.0 | The mobility of UP activities has increased | 75.0 |
| Only the committee of agriculture,health, education and law and order can't run the UP activities fully | 45.0 | The accountability and transparency of UP have increased | 65.0 |
| Other standing committee is needed to ensure the participation of grass root level people in the UP activities | 38.0 | Awareness about UP activities has increased | 90.0 |

* Multiple Response

The study showed that 27% respondents were not aware of UP activities before the PRC emerged among 76 respondents and 13% respondents had a lack of good relation with UP representatives. The enormous number of respondents (72 %) expressed their view that they had a lack of knowledge about UP activities and 24% respondents had lack of

opportunity to know about the UP activities. This clearly presents that people had inadequate opportunities to know about UP activities before the PRC emerged. At that time, PRC involved in creating awareness among people and assuring peoples' collaborations with UP activities in differentways.

The respondents were asked why they were not involved with UP activities before the PRC emerged. They had expressed their view, and it was found that 82% respondents had a lack of knowledge about UP activities among 73 respondents in the study area. On the other hand, 34% respondents had a lack of interest about UP activities, 41% respondents agreed that they had lack of opportunities in working UP activities, and 24% respondents thought that UP did not work perfectly. As a reason, they were not involved with UP activities before the PRC emerged. It clearly implies that after the PRC emerged, people were trying to involve themselves in UP activities at that time.

The respondents were asked how PRC contributed in general peoples' involvement in UP standing committee. However, the study found that 38% respondents mentioned PRC makes them aware of their role in the committee, 55% respondents opined PRC mentions their importance in standing committee to mobilize UP activities, 49% respondents agreed that PRC arranges meetings and canvas at different times and 64% respondents opined that the PRC encourages the UP chairman to constitute respective committees. The PRC mainly

The respondents were asked why they did not participate in the UP budget before the PRC emerged and found that 70% respondents did not have knowledge about UP budget, 43% respondents were not invited to participate, while 54% respondents assumed that the absence of UP budget and 27% respondents had no interest to participate in the budget session.

The study showed that 75% respondents expressed their view that PRC makes them aware about the UP budget, 59% respondents mentioned that PRC encourages them to participate in the budget, while 40% respondents revealed that PRC states their role in budget and 41% respondents explained that PRC states the way to solve the problem by the budget. PRC is trying to ensure people's participation in UP budget session in different ways. Actually, UP representatives should perform these activities, but they did not perform that and this is why people were not aware and sometimes not interested to participate. The PRC contributed in many ways to ensure people's participation in the UP budget through which people's desire could be fulfilled.

In the study, 76% respondents considered that PRC explains the necessity of birth registration to UP representatives, 82% respondents assumed that PRC advertises about birth registration in UP, 61% respondents explained that the PRC discusses about birth registration in yard meeting, and 68% assumed

encourages UP chairman to constitute the respective committee because he holds the authority to formulate the committees, which was also maximum respondents agreed. Moreover, they arranged meeting, canvas, raised awareness among people and mentioned their importance in committees. Hence, PRC has played multiple roles to ensure general peoples' participation in the UP standing committee.

The PRC only worked with 4 standing committees, which was not enough to achieve the accountable and transparent aspect of UP. That is why; respondents were asked why PRC should come forward to contribute other standing committees. While 62% respondents viewed that necessity of other standing committees, 56% respondents agreed that other standing committee has a significant role to achieve UP's objectives. On the other hand, 45% respondents assumed that only agriculture, health, education, and law and order standing committees can't run the UP activities successfully and 38% respondents believed that other standing committee would ensure the grass root level of people's participation in UP activities. Thus, it is visible that the PRC should have equally treated all the standing committees so that people from all committees would get more benefits.

that the PRC also discusses about birth registration in citizen committee. Actually, birth registration was compulsory for every child in Bangladesh in 2004. Before 2004 the birth registration existed, but people were not responsive about it. At the initial stage of PRC's activities, it emphasized the necessity of birth registration. After 2004, when birth registration became compulsory for every child, till then people did not receive it as necessary. At that time PRC took the various initiatives for proper birth registration. Therefore, people were very much careful regarding the importance of birth registration.

The roles and responsibilities of UP representatives are the considerable factors to run the UP activities properly. In Bangladesh, the Union Parishad is a very old institution to support the central government, but the scenario of the UP representatives' roles and responsibilities is very much disappointing because maximum UP representatives do not know their roles and responsibilities. Besides these, there is no scope to know about it and the government does not train them to regulate their roles and responsibilities in UP activities. PRC was a non-government organization, which came forward to helping the UP representatives of their roles and responsibilities by which people can be benefited. The respondents were asked whether there any development in the relationship between the people and UP

representatives after starting PRC activities. And it was found that 100% respondents assumed that, the relationship between people and UP representatives was developed after PRC emerged. In the study, the representatives expressed their view in various ways in which the relationship between people and UP representatives has been developed, where it was found that, 70% respondents expressed their view that the cordiality of UP representatives has increased, 75% respondents considered that the mobility of UP activities had increased, 65% respondents believed that the accountability and the transparency of the UP had increased and 90% respondents assumed that their awareness about UP activities had been increased due to the PRC's intervention. Therefore, PRC contributes both the UP representatives and the people by whom the roles and responsibilities were increasing both the UP representatives and peoples, which is beneficial for our overall development.

CONCLUSIONS

Local government is acknowledged as a highly viable mechanism through which democratic processes and practices can be established and participatory development can be ensured. It is impossible to realize national development goals without proper and accelerated local development. But unfortunately at present, the Union Parishad in Bangladesh remains weak and perpetually dependent upon the central government through various means of political and administrative control. They are also constrained by little transparency, low capacity, bureaucratic control, political interference, limited authority, lack of accountability of service providers and weak financial resources and with limited orientation towards local communities. The findings of the study explicate that now the people are very much aware about their UP activities and other aspect of the UP. The knowledge about UP activities and other UP function, level of participation, awareness about UP activities, roles and responsibilities, etc. has been developed due to PRC,s initiative and activities. On the other side, the UP standing committee is revitalizing its activities, birth registration are properly running, peoples access to UP budgeting, identifying the community problems and taking proper step, the roles and responsibilities of UP representatives has been increased and UP is trying to ensure its transparent and accountable aspect. All of

these changes have been occurred due to the PRC's initiative and activities. In view of study findings, it can be explained that people are now very much enthuse overall aspect of UP and at the same time PRC had successfully motivated the people and UP representatives. But it is generally lifted up the question that, all these activities should be focused by the government. The government always speaks about the transparency and accountability, but the government does not take the sufficient initiatives to ensure its transparency and accountability. However, finally the government should be sincere about Union Parishad because Union Parishad can ensure the grassroots level development of the country. Besides these the people also should be more sincere about their Union Parishad for overall development.

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