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Empowering local government through decentralised WASH programmes in Bangladesh

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PUBLISHER

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VERSION

VoR (Version of Record)

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Ahmed, Nazneen, and Enamul Kabir. 2019. "Empowering Local Government Through Decentralised WASH Programmes in Bangladesh". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/31010>.

37th WEDC International Conference, Hanoi, Vietnam, 2014

**SUSTAINABLE WATER AND SANITATION SERVICES
FOR ALL IN A FAST CHANGING WORLD**

**Empowering local government through decentralised
WASH programmes in Bangladesh**

N. Ahmed & E. Kabir, Bangladesh

BRIEFING PAPER 1995

While the Government of Bangladesh has gained itself a good reputation with regards to achieving the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 7, institutional reforms and modernisation of public service providers in the local governments are still needed for quality delivery and maintenance of water supply and sanitation services. Decentralisation of decision making and financial management to LGIs, along with bridging gap between the citizens and public representatives through participatory planning is one of the vital pre-requisites of integrated rural development. HYSAWA (Hygiene, Sanitation & Water) Fund, an autonomous financing organization, mobilizes resources and technical support for the LGIs for delivery of decentralized WatSan services in a transparent and accountable manner. Direct linkage with the funding source is regarded as a key to empower local governments, which, together with capacity building inputs will promote greater devolution of administrative and financial power to them. An effective engagement of local government is needed for sustainability of WASH services.

Introduction

Local governments in this Indian sub-continent have existed in varied forms for several hundred years including the colonial period. Ever since its independence in 1971, successive Governments of Bangladesh have played with different models of Local Government to promote decentralization and local governance. Article-11 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh reads "People will effectively participate through their elected representatives at all levels of administration to ensure a truly democratic system." In addition, Article-59 requires that "Local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law."

Although the institutional structure and authority of the Local Government are little different to what existed during the colonial rule, some progresses have been made at least in the legislative domain with the promulgation of the Union Parishad (Council) Act 2009 and Upazila Parishad (Sub district Council) 2011. In order to complement the government's reform initiatives and promote inclusive growth, the local government agencies need to be assigned with fiscal and administrative devolution of authority besides being strengthened capacity and resource-wise.

Linking local governance with WASH

As decentralisation is a key requirement to achieving good governance, the Hygiene, Sanitation and Water Supply (HYSAWA) Fund operates on this principle. The Government of Bangladesh and Donors have embarked on a new approach to improve rural water supply and sanitation in the country by setting up a national Fund for rural hygiene, water supply and sanitation. The fund is called the HYSAWA Fund (Hygiene, Sanitation and Water Supply Fund) and is governed by a board with representatives of senior Government officials, local government institutions, NGOs and civil society. A significant change in the funding procedure and a paradigm shift from "business as usual" to a direct demand driven approach in planning and implementing projects at local level, are two challenging tasks being carried out at present. The HYSAWA Fund works as a basket fund to mobilise funds from Government and donor agencies, currently

DANIDA, AusAID and SDC. While Bangladesh has gained itself a good reputation in regards to the active role played by individual households and the private sector, the provision of rural water supply, institutional reforms and modernisation of public service providers are still needed in order to cope with the increasing demands for reliable and quality water supply and sanitation services. One of the vital objectives of the implementation approach is to decentralise decision making and financial management to local government institutions in regards to hygiene, sanitation and water supply. Direct linkage with the funding source is regarded as a key to empower local governments, which together with capacity building inputs will promote greater devolution of administrative and financial power to local governments.

The Hygiene, Sanitation and Water Supply (HYSAWA) Fund has been effective in providing direct support to the LGIs, which are now gradually developing the capacity in managing smaller water supply and sanitation projects. Instead of doing it by itself, HYSAWA channels the WASH service delivery through Union Councils so that they gain the experience of managing large scale projects, human resources and funds efficiently and accountably, in line with Government mandates. Typically these Councils suffer due to insufficient fund, for instance, the government block grant, which they receive, is meagre. With their limited taxation authority, the revenues the Councils generate or are able to retain after transferring a major portion to the central government, have also remained insignificant for decades (Sarker 2003). That is why in HYSAWA project, the Union Councils receive and have full authority over funds. HYSAWA hopes that this learning-by-doing will enable the LGIs to deliver other public services equally well when the project is phased out. Simultaneously, this approach will lead to citizens benefitting from improved public services and will pave a pathway for active public participation, hence more equitable development.

Local government representatives supervise the formation of Community Development Forum (CDF), a courtyard session that employs Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises to help communities plan their demands for WatSan infrastructure. Each CDF is representative of 20 to 25 households. This PRA exercise also helps to identify the extreme poor in a village and enables villagers to select water and sanitation interventions in a pro-poor and gender friendly manner. CDFs are the principal means of disseminating hygiene messages and motivating communities toward CLTS. They are a platform to encouraging bottom-up planning and creating an air of trust between local governments and public.

Cultivating transparency and building LGIs' capacities

The Local Government Institutions (LGIs) in Bangladesh have long been a subject of debate over the efficiency factor and this is reflected in the bilateral and multilateral donors' traditional preference to disburse aid to the central government agencies (Fox, 2008). Apart from this, fund embezzlement is another most common complaint directed at all levels of the Bangladeshi government, but, it is one that can be ameliorated with an appropriate counter strategy as is found in HYSAWA programme areas.

Transparency in fund management is garnered by appointing three local government representatives to be account signatories for opening a bank account. This is to ensure that no single member has full control over the funds or single authority to make decisions. In addition, the cheque signatories must submit a meeting resolution to withdraw funds, thereby demonstrating that the purpose and the amount of money to be spent have been unanimously agreed upon by all members of the respective Council. The leash on funds is further tightened by orienting the commercial bank officials as gatekeepers so that they do not entertain cheques which are not accompanied by the necessary meeting resolution.

But it is the local government's online management of project expenditure that is the most surprising accomplishment – in a country where computer literacy is still a far cry and where the local government struggles to maintain the even the common cash-books or ledgers, it is inspiring to see that UPs of HYSAWA project areas have been trained on MIS. This also bears witness to their transparency and accountability in handling funds.

Before they assume their new roles, local government officials are trained on a range of professional topics including accounting, public procurement rules, project design and management, gender, transparency etc. to help them efficiently discharge their responsibilities and apply these lessons on other service deliveries as well.

Stimulating citizen's participation in local government

In a country of varying nationalistic and religious ideologies and top-down rather than grassroots democracy, LGIs are largely seen as electoral constituencies for securing votes than as government's administrative institutions to promote democratic processes. In an attempt to make LGIs more people-

centred, participatory and decentralised, in the last few years, the Government of Bangladesh has established the concept of “Standing Committee” and mandated every Upazila and Union Council to have 13 Standing Committees respectively for a range of development agendas, including water and sanitation. Members of each Union Council Standing Committee, for example, should be composed of community people and one Council representative to encourage people’s participation in meetings and decision-making process.

The Council Members are further required to reach out to communities and collect their feedback on local development agendas by holding six monthly and annual open meetings at the Ward level, which forms the smallest unit of a constituency (Local Government Division, 2012).

Before beginning project interventions, HYSAWA had assessed the present situation and practices of the Standing Committees of the Union Councils of 42 Unions in Khulna, Jessore and Satkhira districts and discovered the picture to be rather grim. Standing Committees in these Unions were not performing up to the desired level due to lack of political commitments, public demand, unclear terms of references of Standing Committees, reluctance on the part of Union Council Chairman to delegate authority to the Committee members and even due to absence of Standing Committees or their existence only in paper. All these indicate the violation of certain provisions of the Union Parishad Act -2009 and form one of the root causes of their non-functioning. A maximum of seven UPs out of 42 studied, had formed their Standing Committees according to law - an output of donor-assisted project implementation. Against this backdrop, playing the role of the third sector, HYSAWA began their interventions. In the course of a year, it has activated a good number of Upazila and Union Council Standing Committees and regularized their meetings, including those meant for the Ward level.

“Honestly speaking, we demonstrate the Union Council’s Ward meetings every year in papers only. This is the first time in reality we are holding a meeting with the people. We have always avoided the public for fear of their criticism as we are not able to fulfil all of their demands,” confessed Kazi Shahidul Islam Pito, Member, Jogipal Union Council, Digholia Upazila, Khulna district. Despite the public’s severe criticism of the Council representatives, for the sake of the greater interest, the Jogipal Union, like other Unions enlisted under HYSAWA, had invited all villagers to participate in the Ward meetings and plan for local development. The agendas of each Ward meeting include assessing the progress of present development work in that respective Ward as well as prioritising and planning the Ward’s future work, for example, improving roads and culverts, drainage system, constructing hygienic latrines and so on.

The feeling of inclusion is best summarised by Yusuf Ali Khalifa, an inhabitant, who upon attending one Ward meeting of Jogipal Union, echoed the feelings of all others who were present, “I haven’t seen this happening in the past 30 years –this is the first time when a public representative has dared to face us and is even asking for our opinion to improve our area!”

Building women leaders in local government through WASH

“We need a sincere woman like you for our Ward Member. You must run the Union Member election, we will pay the nomination fee for you” – this is what the public told Lalima Akhter (34), a community volunteer, who had no intention of joining politics. “I was happy serving my village people as a volunteer,” said Lalima, “However, it was my people who put their faith in me and encouraged me to step up as a politician and run the election.”

And that is how Lalima Akhter, a mother of two, made her entry into politics. Lalima is a high school graduate who got married after completing her H.S.C. She could not study further. Yet today, she represents Ward no.4 in the Kulia Union, Mollar Haat Upazila, Bagerhat district.

Lalima’s story of evolving from a rural housewife to a community volunteer and subsequently to a transparent politician speaks of the success and upholds Articles 10 and 38 of the Union Parishad Act 2009 and is a reflection of women’s leadership role in the otherwise patriarchal context of the local government.

In Lalima’s case, the platform to emerge as a community leader came in the form of this HYSAWA, which began their WatSan activities in Kulia Union, Mollar Haat Upazila of Bagerhat district a few years ago. Kulia Union has some 80, 000 people and the majority of the population were then either practising open defecation or using unhygienic latrines and were alarmingly unaware of the detrimental effects all these had on health.

“When I got married and came to my in-laws’ house at Kulia Union, I was horrified to see that male members from my husband’s family were defecating in the open and women were using filthy, hanging latrines. This was the scenario in the whole village. As a new bride, for me, it would have been impertinent to speak up against this. But then, I was also finding it difficult to endure because my father’s house had a

proper latrine and I had grown used to that. That is why I was desperately looking for a way to change their habits without raising a family feud,” this is how Lalima expressed her initial frustration over latrine-use in her in-laws’ house. This frustration got transformed into her motivation to improve the situation. So, when HYSAWA came into the scene and the Union Parishad announced that it would require some volunteers to mobilise communities, Lalima stepped up and seized the opportunity.

Lalima and other volunteers were trained on Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) exercises so that they could bring their people together and assist them in raising their water and sanitation needs with the Union Parishad functionaries. These activities brought Lalima closer to her community and soon she gained their trust enough to represent them in the Union Parishad.

However, Lalima’s role in the UP as a woman has also been a strain at the leash sometimes. It is, as she puts it, “In the beginning we three female members were ignored by the men. They were not assigning us any responsibility from government or donor-aided projects like Vulnerable Group Development or Local Government Support Programme. They were treating us like we didn’t know how to work. But I understood their attitude quickly and didn’t let that continue.”

And it is indeed admiring the way a common, rural woman like Lalima handles this hostile situation at her work place. “I have formed an alliance with the other two female members. Whenever our UP Chairman throws a date for any meeting to discuss any topic, I hold my own meeting with the female members beforehand and brief them on our expected roles, it is a kind of preparatory meeting. That way, we ensure that we, women Members, are on the same page and will not allow ourselves to be dominated or degraded by our male Members. It works for us this way.” That is how grass-root women have reached new heights under HYSAWA’s decentralised programme. Lalima’s words echo the potential for such gender-responsive local governance - “These days my people tell me, ‘we want to see you as UP Chairman next. You are absolutely fit for that role.’”

Outcome achieved

The desired results of decentralization are greater accountability, transparency, better local participation and improved efficiency and equity in service delivery. The path of progress that impact/ outcome of decentralization will take cannot be predicted. In some cases, it may take many years for the desired impact to be noticed, while for others, progress can be noticed in a much shorter time. However, the Baseline survey and the recent progress data collection indicate that:

- Citizens’ participation, especially women, in planning WatSan services has increased many folds. HYSAWA approach demands bottom up planning process using PRA exercises at the community level as well as at the ward level; WatSan service provisions and locations are now dictated by the people themselves; The subsidies for the poor are decided by the people themselves.
- A significant numbers of LGIs are now moving into open budgeting system; LGIs are also displaying project information and budget for public information. LGIs have now introduced collective financial decision making by the council as a whole – the resolution accompanies the cheque to the bank. The procurement is done by a committee including external representative, following public procurement rules. Funding from HYSAWA is also demand driven, and based on milestones achieved.

Learning points

- Involving local government has greatly facilitated the delivery of improved WASH services;
- Service delivery has been more effective due to local planning WASH services with participation from citizens, particularly women and poor beneficiaries;
- It has improved transparency and accountability of the local government to the citizens;
- When they have full control over resources, local governments develop ownership and become proactive in identifying and fulfilling community needs instead of waiting for instructions from central government;
- If LGs are given proper orientation and education on good governance indicators, then it is possible to transform them into informed and objective decision makers capable of demonstrating social justice, equity, gender integration and similar other factors in delivering public services;
- Enhanced local governments capacity and central governments confidence on them to design and implement other development projects locally;
- Improved monitoring and operations and maintenance (O&M) of WASH services;
- Reduced overall costs and minimal pilferage has improved efficiency and “value for money”.

- Community contribution to infrastructure development has also brought ownership, increased revenue generation and sustainable management.

Challenges

- Technical challenges: Over the past years, local governments have been tasked with a new set of service authority functions ranging from budgeting, planning and financing to regulation of service providers, construction oversight and monitoring. Without the historic experience to fulfil these functions, local governments require support in all these areas to become fully functional service authorities.
- Human resource challenges: As a result of partial transfer of human resources, local governments suffer from severe human resource shortages. In addition, local governments often lack the autonomy to manage their own staff (hiring and incentivising) and rely heavily on central government to fill in key positions and decide on civil servants' posting around the country. Due to genuine budget constraints, pressure from partners to reduce public spending and bureaucratic procedures, human resource-related requests from local governments are often not satisfied
- Reliance on externally funded temporary programmes: While strengthening the institutional capacity of local government requires properly structured support programmes support is often provided through a patchwork of programmes, often driven by development partners and NGOs rather than by national government policy and programmes. This piecemeal approach negatively impacts the quality of the capacity support provided.

Conclusions

An effective engagement of local government is needed for sustainability. The role of local government needs to be recognised and supported. Their strengths, capacities and limitations should be appreciated. The government of Bangladesh should actively pursue the policy of decentralization and increasingly empower and devolve financial authority to local government in order to bring about sustainable development. However, this would require a major sector reform, patience and very high political commitment. In addition, a continuous back up support from government's technical department would be necessary, at least for some time or they should be allowed to buy those back up services from the market.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to extend thanks to Abul Bashar, Programme Officer- Local Governance, Mahub Rashid, District Project Officer, Forhad Hussain, Programme Officer, HYSAWA Fund and development partners namely the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) for their support.

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Contact details

Ms. Nazneen Ahmed
House-22, Road: 113/A, Gulshan 2
Dhaka 1212, Bangladesh
Tel: +88 02 9888143, 9841425
Fax: +88 02 9889729
Email: nazpopy@gmail.com
www.hysawa.org

Mr. Enamul Kabir
House-22, Road: 113/A, Gulshan 2, Dhaka 1212,
Bangladesh
Tel: +88 02 9888143, 9841425
Fax: +88 02 9889729
Email: ekabir@hysawa.org
www.hysawa.org