

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Institutionalizing Downward Accountability: The Bangladesh Experience

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Defining ‘Accountability’ and ‘Downward Accountability’

‘Accountability’ is a principle according to which a person or institution is responsible for a set of duties and can be required to give an account of their fulfilment to an authority that is in a position to issue rewards or punishment.¹

Meanwhile, ‘Downward Accountability’ refers to organisations being accountable to their target communities and groups. It is a shift from seeing the affected population simply as beneficiaries to viewing them as key partners and stakeholders in their own path to a thriving life. It aims to ensure that communities are meaningfully and continuously involved in decisions that directly impact their lives.²

‘Downward Accountability’ in Development

‘Downward Accountability’ is not a new concept in the development discourse; however, the effort to include citizens’ voices in the planning process have largely been unsuccessful in many countries including Bangladesh due to factors including the lack of accountability within different tiers of government institutions, weak chain of reporting, and bureaucracy’s limited capacity.

Mega development projects seldom consider opinions of citizens, as they are decided at national level. Due to this nature of a top-down approach, there is hardly any opportunity for ordinary citizens to give their opinions. Furthermore, these megaprojects are often not the priority of the mass people. In some cases, excessive costs of these mega projects even tend to impose long-term burden upon citizens in terms of additional taxes. And sur charges. On the contrary, many smaller development plans are undertaken through a bottom-up planning process with active participation of the local community. They also give local people opportunities to select their priorities and needs. As a consequence, this bottom-up approach tend to ensure community ownership and induce commitment from the local people who need material support the most.

¹ Castiglione, Dario. "accountability". Encyclopedia Britannica, 22 Oct. 2012, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/accountability>. Accessed 27 February 2023.

² ARQAAM monitoring and evaluation, *Download accountability*, 2022. <https://www.arqaam.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Cheat-sheets-Downward-Accountability.pdf>

Overview of Development Planning in Bangladesh

At present, the ruling party in Bangladesh enjoys absolute majority in the National Parliament. Opposition voice is weak and debates on controversial issues are rare. Decisions are mostly top-down and the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) headed by the Prime Minister approves all national-level projects. The Planning Commission formulates long-term development plans, and the Ministry of Finance develops annual budgets which is presented in the National Parliament each year in June.

Similarly, the Local Government Institutions (LGIs) are mandated to formulate both long-term (five years) and annual development plans and budgets. However, plans between these two institutions, national and local levels, are delinked. The national plans do not count the local plans and budgets, which are formulated with their own revenue earned from the community. Citizens are finding it increasingly difficult to influence national development planning although some consultation is held with a number of eminent citizens. Therefore, the best chance of ensuring downward accountability is to strengthen local level planning process and increase people's participation.

While there are some noteworthy cases in which citizen-led initiatives have successfully incorporated transparent planning process to provide better services to the people, Bangladesh LGIs' capacity to conduct effective participatory planning is still a matter of concern. To address this concern, all LGIs involved in the planning process should be staffed with trained officials who are familiar with the logistical procedures. They also need to engage NGOs, CSOs, and expert individuals more actively.

Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)'s Experience with Using Social Accountability Tools

A growing number of CSOs have begun to employ Social Accountability tools (e.g. public hearing, social audit, community score card, grievance redressal) as a means of ensuring accountability of public institutions and local elected representatives.

This 'Social Accountability and Dialogue' has been proven to be an effective and immediate tool to solve public service-related problems at the local level. Partner NGOs have been assisting citizen groups to monitor community level public services. Last year, 2,643 problems that obstructed service delivery were identified in the pool of 892 service-outlets that were monitored. Solutions and action plans were established through dialogues with local authorities, and citizen groups monitor and assess their implementation in the subsequent dialogues.

The case of MJF demonstrates how it has used this tool.

On one occasion, over 3,000 paddy farmers in a small, marginalized locality in northern Bangladesh resolved a corruption issue at the government-enlisted selling points by taking advantage of public hearings. When buying paddy from the farmers, the storekeepers removed 2kg from every 40kg. During a public hearing arranged by a local citizen support group, the farmers raised this issue to a local agriculture officer. In response, two key decisions enabling fair trade were reached: 1) strengthened surveillance, 2) establishment of mobile courts at the selling points. Thanks to these efforts, the farmers earned a rightful financial benefit of 10,530,000 Taka (approx. 105,300 USD). Afterwards, the local elected Chairman recognized this successful case of downward accountability and instructed every Union to hold public hearings for any grievances raised by ordinary citizens, thereby creating a meaningful ripple effect in multiple local communities.

Conclusion

Some of the biggest challenges in institutionalizing downward accountability are the disconnect between national and local level planning, as well as the lack of transparency at every level. While there have been successful cases of CSOs and NGOs making meaningful intervention at the local level to improve democracy, these are far from the norm. Overcoming this reality requires powerful political will from the top to decentralize its governance structure and empowerment of various tiers of the elected bodies. Better access to information further enhances the credibility of the government. The ‘Right to Information (RTI) Act’ was enacted in 2009 to address the people’s demand to make all government information accessible to the general public. Based on this Act, marginalized citizens can challenge the local authorities regarding their use of local budget, leakage in public funds, or infrastructure construction. This enabled the local communities to hold numerous public officials accountable for their inefficiency and corruption. When people can check their public institutions through information access, ‘true’ downward accountability that reflects the preamble of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh—“All powers in the Republic belong to the people”³—can be realized. ■

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- [3] Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, art. 7. (1). 1972. <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-details-367.html>.

³ Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, art. 7. (1). 1972. <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-details-367.html>

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