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Social accountability initiatives and civil society contribution to anti- corruption efforts in Bangladesh

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About the author

Kaunain Rahman

Query

What examples of social accountability initiatives and civil society contribution have there been to anti-corruption efforts in Bangladesh? The question should look at activities beyond those that TI Bangladesh has been involved in and look at journalism, faith-based organisations, community groups, people's movements, NGOs, youth groups and professional organisations, etc.

Summary

While scoring very poorly on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, Bangladesh has recorded moderate to good progress on other indicators of socio-economic development, leading some to speak of a "Bangladesh paradox" (US Department of State 2016; Mushtaq Khan 2017; Transparency International 2018).

Moreover, despite the myriad challenges civil society groups face, ranging from government backlashes to threats from rising radical groups, there remain a number of civil society organisations actively engaged in anti-corruption efforts in Bangladesh.

Anti-corruption initiatives of the Bangladeshi civil society are undertaken largely by not-for-profit non-governmental organisations, mostly in the form of increasing accountability of government institutions and setting the stage for participatory governance, especially at the local level (for example, BRAC and Shujan).

While larger bodies, like Transparency International Bangladesh and Centre for Policy Dialogue, offer research and advocacy for the national level, other decentralised organisations, like Manusher Jonno and DW Akademie, focus on the grassroots or a particular sector (radio communication in the case of the latter). Media houses, especially print dailies like Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, serve a watchdog function.

Background

Since Transparency International's overview of corruption and anti-corruption in Bangladesh¹ in 2015, the country has remained embroiled in political and social unrest² (Freedom House 2017a). The Bertelsmann Stiftung notes that the capacity of the state to manage reforms and implement its policy priorities is undermined³ by partisan politics, one-upmanship and widespread corruption (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018).

Official harassment of the political opposition, as well as criticism of the media and civil society voices, is on the rise (Freedom House 2017a). Security forces carry out a range of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial executions, disappearances and torture, with near impunity (Freedom House 2017a). Meanwhile, those with dissident views – including secularists, academics, religious minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) activists – are subject to attacks by Islamist extremist groups (Freedom House 2017a).

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main opposition to the incumbent Awami League (AL) government, resorted to massive violence across the country after boycotting⁴ the elections in 2014, leading to arrests and harassment of key party officials by the security forces (Freedom House 2017a).

The country has witnessed a rise in radicalism and extremism with systematic attacks aimed at silencing secular bloggers, many of whom have been murdered (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018). Though the government denies the domestic presence of Islamic State (IS), all the attacks between 2015 and

1. <https://knowledgehub.transparency.org/helpdesk/overview-of-corruption-and-anti-corruption-in-bangladesh>

2. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/bangladesh>

3. <https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/BGD/>

4. In 2011, the caretaker government system (a non-partisan body overseeing the elections) was abolished by the Bangladeshi Awami League government allowing general elections under elected partisan governments (Liton and Hasan 2011). This led to the boycott of the 2014 elections by the main opposition party – BNP (Freedom House 2017a). Of the total of 153 candidates, more than half of the parliamentary seats, ran unopposed – a virtual disenfranchisement of more than half the population (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018). The ruling AL won 233 of 300 seats (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018). The elections were also marred by extensive violence – Human Rights Watch termed them the bloodiest since the country's independence – and intimidation by a range of political parties. As a result, voter turnout was at a historic low: 39% according to the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC), while press reports claim the turnout was about 20% (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018).

2016 were claimed by IS and al-Qaeda in South Asia (AQIS) (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018). The Islamic State even took responsibility of the Gulshan café attack in 2016 where 20 hostages and two police officers were killed in the bakery in Dhaka that was known to be popular with foreigners (Freedom House 2017a; Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018).

The attacks led to a broad crackdown on radical groups with around 15,000 people arrested to curb a spate of extremist violence (Freedom House 2017a). Observers said the initiative involved widespread human rights abuses by authorities, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and custodial deaths (Freedom House 2017a).

Under the AL government, anti-corruption efforts have been weakened by politicised enforcement and subversion of the judicial process (Freedom House 2017a). In particular, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has become ineffective and subject to overt political interference (Freedom House 2017a). In 2016, the government pushed the Anti-Corruption Commission (Amendment) Bill through parliament, which reauthorised police to pursue cases of fraud, forgery and cheating under eight sections of the penal code (Acharjee 2015; ABnews 2016). Former ACC Chairman M Badiuzzaman stated that the inclusion of these sections to the ACC's schedule via an amendment in 2013 hampered the investigation process of corruption cases with 5,000 cases on forgery and cheating pending with the anti-graft body⁵ (Acharjee 2015). The need to segregate the workload and streamline the focus area of the body was deemed necessary (Acharjee 2015; Bdnews24.com 2016). In practice, however, the situation may not have notably affected the ACC as the 2018 BTI report claims that the situation on the ground remains unchanged (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018).

The Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act, which took effect in 2016, has made it more difficult for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to obtain foreign funds and has given officials broad authority to de-register NGOs that make “derogatory” comments about

5. Until 2013, the police investigated cases filed under these sections and they were tried in courts of judicial magistrates (Acharjee 2015; Bdnews24.com 2016). Following the Criminal Law Amendment Act, district judges were given the authority to try cases filed under the ACC's scheduled offences, however, the number of these courts was relatively low, causing a huge delay in the judicial process. Soon after the amendment, police stopped registering cases under Section 420 and advised the complainants to move the ACC (Acharjee 2015; Bdnews24.com 2016).

government bodies or the constitution, which further curbs the independence of such organisations (Freedom House 2017a).

It also ought to be noted that the massive influx of over 655,000 Rohingya refugees fleeing attacks by the Burmese military has put an unprecedented strain on Bangladesh's already meagre resources, exacerbating governance issues with the result that human trafficking, forced prostitution, price inflation of essential goods and depression of wages are increasingly evident (Khatun 2017; Human Rights Watch 2018). Government apparatuses also have to deal with corrupt third parties who are using the crisis to issue fake Bangladeshi identification to the refugees in exchange of bribes (Khatun 2017).

Taken collectively, the conditions described above has produced an environment in which corruption thrives; Bangladesh ranks 143 out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index 2017⁶.

Despite the scale of the challenge, there are a number of dedicated organisations in Bangladesh who have seen some success in their efforts to curb corruption and promote good governance and citizen accountability.

This brief seeks to determine the contributions made by social accountability initiatives and civil society to anti-corruption efforts in Bangladesh. For this purpose, it is first necessary to provide a working definition of both terms.

6. https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2017#table

Definitions

Social accountability⁷ refers to the various actions, tools and mechanisms that civil society organisations (CSOs), the media, citizens and communities can use to hold elected public officials and non-elected public servants to account (Kohli 2012). These tools complement and reinforce conventional modes and mechanisms of accountability, which include elections, political checks and balances, legal rules and processes and administrative regulations (Kohli 2012). Where corruption, clientelism and state capture are endemic, social accountability can play an important role in curbing these practices (Sarker and Rahman 2014).

Civil society on the other hand, may be defined⁸ as “an ecosystem of organised and organic social and cultural relations existing in the space between the state, business and family, which builds on indigenous and external knowledge, values, traditions and principles to foster collaboration and the achievement of specific goals by and among citizens and other stakeholders”(VanDyck 2017).

While definitions of what constitutes a CSO can vary significantly, a usual feature is that they are organised expressions of civic political participation distinct from the state, which engage in formal political processes such as consultations on new laws or policies (Chandhoke 2002; Laine 2014). They have been defined by Anderson and Parker (1964) as “a form of dynamic, pluralistic behaviour which progressively develops a structure through time and aims at partial or complete modification of the social order” (Shah 2017).

According to VanDyck (2017), civil society can encompass:

- formal associations such as NGOs, faith-based organisations and community-based organisations that have an organised structure and mission and are typically registered entities and groups
- online groups and activities, including social media communities that can be “organised” but do not necessarily have physical, legal or financial structures
- social movements of collective action and/or identity, which can be

7. <http://www.cbgaindia.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Manual-on-Social-Accountability-Concepts-and-Tools.pdf>

8. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/concept-and-definition-civil-society-sustainability>

online or physical

- labour unions and professional associations
- social entrepreneurs employing innovative and/or market-oriented approaches for social and environmental outcomes.

The "enabling environment" for civil society

Freedom House (2017b) rates the press in Bangladesh as “not free”⁹. Physical violence and threats against journalists and bloggers continue with impunity, murders remain unsolved and other acts of violence go unpunished (Freedom House 2017b). Authorities are known to initiate legal action against journalists¹⁰ under restrictive laws, including defamation, sedition and the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act (Freedom House 2017b).

The draft Digital Securities Act¹¹, designed to replace section 57 of the ICT Act, has proposed even harsher penalties for vaguely defined crimes under national security, defamation and “hurting religious feelings” (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Authorities periodically block access to certain news websites, including several known for criticism of the government, and, in 2016, internet access was shut down for several hours in parts of Dhaka (Freedom House 2017b).

According to some journalists and human rights NGOs, journalists engage in self-censorship particularly due to fear of security force retribution (US Department of State 2016; Freedom House 2017b). Freedom of association and assembly is guaranteed by the constitution but is not always respected in practice (GAN Integrity 2018).

The 2009 Right to Information (RTI) Act simplified the fees required to access information, and superseded existing secrecy legislation, and granted

9. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/bangladesh>

10. Ekushey TV chairman Abdus Salam, who was arrested and charged with sedition in 2015 after the station aired a speech by an opposition figure, remained imprisoned at the end of 2016 (Freedom House 2017b). Mahfuz Anam, editor of the Daily Star, had 62 defamation and 17 sedition lawsuits filed against him after he admitted in February to publishing unsubstantiated information, given to him by the military intelligence service in 2007 and 2008 about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (Freedom House 2017b).

11. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/bangladesh>

greater independence to the Information Commission, tasked with overseeing and promoting the law (Freedom House 2017b). However, ongoing challenges include low response rates to requests for information, and the need to increase awareness of the act's existence among the general public and the authorities (Freedom House 2017b). Civil society plays a role in public debate, yet groups are often connected to certain political parties and do not always act in a non-partisan manner (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2018).

The Ministry of Information controls broadcast licensing for both commercial and community outlets. The ministry has occasionally closed television stations, apparently for being in breach of broadcasting regulations (Freedom House 2017b). Currently, a draft Broadcast Act is under scrutiny, and it has drawn criticism from rights groups for prescribing jail terms, rather than fines and other civil measures, for the violation of its provisions (Acharjee 2017; Freedom House 2017b).

Recent analysis by Khan (2017) notes that while Bangladesh has some of the worst governance and anti-corruption scores in the world, since 1980, it has made moderate to good progress on different indicators of economic and social development.

Thus, it is Khan's view that anti-corruption and governance initiatives in Bangladesh have to be located in the context of this paradox¹². Part of the explanation might be found in the fact that anti-corruption strategies in Bangladesh have largely been systemic, primarily focused on the demand side; interventions intended to improve the quality of public institutions through the promotion of transparency, the investigation of corruption and the imposition of legal penalties through prosecution (Khan 2017). Such measures are reliant on a system of vertical enforcement that remains weak in Bangladesh.

Indeed, while the country already had in place most of the formal legislation to be compliant with UNCAC when it acceded to the convention in 2007, the problem in Bangladesh is that informal processes and power relationships prevent the implementation of these laws (Khan 2017).

12. <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24855/1/ACE-WorkingPaper003-BD-AntiCorruption-170907.pdf>

Moreover, direct investigations into allegations of high-level corruption in the current political scenario are unlikely to be effective and may even be counterproductive, as in the Padma Bridge case ¹³(Khan 2017). The Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) Research Consortium recommends¹⁴ that implementable anti-corruption activities should have a low profile, and be based on an outcome-oriented and incremental set of policy proposals. The emphasis should not be on prosecution and punishment but on finding policy combinations that create incentives for stakeholders in particular sectors or activities to behave in more productive ways.

As such, Khan suggests that alternative anti-corruption strategies should be designed, which seek to exploit the “supply side”, by capitalising on the country’s robust civil society scene and relatively active media sector (ACE 2017). Against this background, the importance of social accountability initiatives and civil society contributions to anti-corruption efforts become all the more apparent.

13. In the late 2000s, a World Bank-led consortium agreed to fund a US\$3 billion bridge in southern Bangladesh (ACE 2017). Shortly before the project was to begin, an unconnected investigation implied that a Canadian company had been planning to bribe ministers in Bangladesh to win a contract (ACE 2017). The World Bank insisted that the minister referred to in the documents should be included in a full investigation, and though the government eventually agreed to an investigation by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), it exempted the minister. The World Bank eventually withdrew from the project in the absence of a satisfactory investigation, and the Bangladesh government found more expensive financing from Chinese sources. The cost of construction was also inflated several times in the absence of any credible external monitoring of contracting and costs. Ultimately, the anti-corruption exercise failed to root out corruption, and may even have strengthened the corrupt by demonstrating that pressure from international partners could be resisted (ACE 2017).

14. <https://ace.soas.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ACE-BriefingPaper003-BN-AntiCorruption-171102.pdf>

Examples of social accountability initiatives and civil society contributions to anti-corruption efforts

Transparency International Bangladesh

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) is an independent, non-governmental, non-partisan and non-profit organisation. It is a national chapter of the global anti-corruption NGO, Transparency International.

The current 2014-2019 strategy, Building Integrity Blocks for Effective Change (BIBEC)¹⁵ aims to strengthen a series of mutually supportive and reinforcing “integrity blocks” to effectively reduce corruption. “Blocks” here imply the key institutions, policy/law, education, training, ethics and values, and above all, the people of the country (TIB 2014).

TIB’s website¹⁶, which is primarily in English but also has its resources, reports and its corruption reporting in Bengali, has information on the corruption landscape and the organisation’s activities. It is currently the sole organisation in Bangladesh wholly dedicated to countering corruption and is active in research and policy.

TIB conducts diagnostic studies, household surveys, as well as national integrity system and Sustainable Development Goals assessments. In addition, it operates a parliament watch programme and issues a citizen report card (TIB 2018a). TIB also has an option on its website to report corruption (TIB 2018a), and states that though the organisation has no power to act on the incidents being reported, the information is used for research purposes and the ACC is informed about them as well (TIB 2018a).

Civic Engagement

The organisation engages citizens to help counter corruption. A few notable programmes include (TIB 2018a):

- **Committee of Concerned Citizens (CCC):** a volunteer group to

15. https://www.ti-bangladesh.org/beta3/images/2014/project_proposal_bibec_14_en.pdf

16. <https://www.ti-bangladesh.org>

mobilise citizens to challenge corruption and promote integrity in service delivery at the local level. It currently operates in 45 districts, and its membership is reserved for citizens of Bangladesh aged 30 to 75 years old with no prior criminal history and who agree to adhere to TIB's code of ethics.

- **Youth Engagement and Support (YES):** focuses on nurturing strong ethical values and democratic governance among young people, primarily at the local level. There are 60 such groups across the country.
- **Young Professionals against Corruption (YPAC):** is mainly comprised of young people who are too old to participate in the YES groups but are keen on continuing to engage in TIB's work in some form.
- **Mothers' Gathering:** aims to make mothers aware of the entitlements of their school-going children and act as a social accountability tool which, in a participatory process, promotes disclosure and transparency in schools, reduces unauthorised payments for services provided by the school, and holds the school authorities accountable. It is also a useful process of woman participation and empowerment in the improvement of primary education.
- **Face-the-Public (FtP):** TIB organises accountability programmes in which citizens have an opportunity to meet public representatives and officials to discuss public affairs.
- **Advice and Information Desks (AI Desks):** run as forums for receiving reports of corruption, educating the public at the local level on their rights, providing effective channels for dialogue on corruption cases, and establishing working partnerships with relevant government institutions involved in countering corruption. It also provides basic information (for example: the cost of drugs; doctors' hours; examination fees; budget of the Union Parishad) and advice on key public services to the public. These AI Desks are placed at CCC offices and there are satellite AI Desks in schools, hospitals and local government offices.

Outreach, communication and advocacy

In addition to these “bottom-up” approaches, TIB engages with the government, organising meetings with policymakers and public officials (TIB 2018a). TIB's sustained advocacy and engagement has contributed to a number of developments in the field of anti-corruption (TIB 2014). A few selected success stories are as follows:

- It acted as a catalyst for the enactment of the Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2004 followed by the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Commission and, since 2009, it has been campaigning for effective implementation of the act and ensuring independence for the ACC (TIB 2018c).
- TIB also worked closely with the Government of Bangladesh to draft the Right to Information Act 2009 and Whistle Blowers Protection Act 2011 (TIB 2014).
- TIB's efforts also bore fruit in the Election Commission study of 2006 which came up with 29 recommendations of which 19 were implemented¹⁷ (TIB 2014).
- Through project tracking, TIB found evidence of governance lapses in climate change adaptation finance in 2010 (TIB 2018c). It helped unearth stories of maladaptation in the construction of the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) funded cyclone resistant housing, which led to BCCTF allocating additional funds to its housing scheme to redress construction anomalies (TIB 2018c).

Finally, TIB hosts the Investigative Journalism Awards (since 1999, encouraging the exposure of systemic corruption), Transparency International Integrity Awards (recognising the courage of individuals and organisations who have made a significant impact to reducing levels of corruption), cartoon competitions, debates, round table discussions, press conferences and seminars (TIB 2018a).

Road ahead

Every year TIB publishes a summary of reports on selected sectors and/or institutions (TIB 2014). The current volume entitled *Governance Challenges of Bangladesh: The Way Forward* is the first one available in English as well as Bengali (TIB 2018b). The issue reports and recommends the way forward on various issues including but not limited to Sustainable Development Goals, ACC's public hearings, good governance in disaster management and assessment of governance challenges in providing refuge to the forcibly displaced Rohingya community (TIB 2018b).

17. These included bringing the EC Secretariat under its own control, the establishment of an information centre and website, making available election related data including personal data of candidates to the public, separate allocation for EC in the national budget, the updating of voter database annually and the introduction of Voter ID and EVM.

The Daily Star and Prothom Alo

Both of these daily newspapers – The Daily Star¹⁸ (leading English-language paper), and Prothom Alo¹⁹ (leading Bengali-language paper), owned by Transcom Group Limited – are known for their criticism of the incumbent government (Freedom House 2017b). For this reason, in 2016, journalists from these newspapers were not permitted²⁰ access to events with the prime minister (US Department of State 2016; Freedom House 2017b).

Other examples of government pressure on these papers include an incident in 2015 when the army’s military intelligence wing successfully compelled a number of major companies to stop advertising in Prothom Alo and The Daily Star after both papers reported on a sensitive army operation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region (Freedom House 2017b).

The Bangladesh 2016 Human Rights Report by the US Department of State stated that members of the ruling party initiated 79 sedition and defamation cases in multiple courts against Mahfuz Anam, editor of The Daily Star, for publishing reports of corruption involving Prime Minister Hasina in 2007 and 2008. Hasina also publicly stated Anam’s newspaper and its sister media outlet, Prothom Alo, would be punished²¹ for publishing the reports (US Department of State 2016).

A search of the archives of both newspapers revealed a repository of reporting on corruption, transparency and good governance. In fact, for 2017 alone, there were more than 70 articles on “corruption” in The Daily Star, and more than 60 articles on *Durniti* (corruption) by Prothom Alo. Their coverage spans from advocacy columns highlighting the ills of corruption, to news pieces on, for example, the imprisonment of the BNP chairperson and former prime minister Khaleda Zia earlier this year after she was handed a five-year sentence²² in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case (Halder, Adhikary and Habib 2018).

Both dailies can be accessed online and have e-paper options.

18. <https://www.thedailystar.net>

19. <http://www.prothomalo.com>

20. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/bangladesh>

21. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/265744.pdf>

22. <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/khaleda-zia-corruption-verdict-khaleda-lands-jail-1531957>

DW Akademie

DW Akademie is Germany's leading organisation for international media development, supporting the development of independent, transparent media systems, quality journalism and media (DW Akademie 2018).

The work of the DW Akademie in Bangladesh focuses on improving the quality of reporting as well as supporting community radio stations (DW Akademie 2016). The organisation notes that news coverage in Bangladesh is politically charged and polarising, with the media favouring either the ruling party or the opposition, and thus it seeks to promote critical, independent, non-partisan journalism (DW Akademie 2016).

It is also helping create a network of local radio stations to enable regional reporters to support one another and exchange programme content (DW Akademie 2016). It has also partnered with universities in Rajshahi and Chittagong to work on curriculum reform to improve journalism training and education standards (DW Akademie 2016).

During one of DW Academies' in-house training for journalists at ABC Radio (owned by Transcom Group Limited – the same company that owns The Daily Star and Prothom Alo), the participants produced a pilot programme called Ayna ("The Mirror"), which included music, news, vox pops, interviews and clips from celebrities commenting on corruption and its prevention (Wojcik 2014).

Currently, DW Akademie along with the German development organisation GiZ works closely with the ACC on good governance²³ and communication²⁴ projects to counter corruption in Bangladesh (Wojcik 2014; GiZ 2018). For example, the project Communication and Dialogue About Anti-Corruption helped the ACC draft a new communication policy to interact with new and traditional media, as well as to train journalists to foster fact-based reporting (GiZ 2018).

23. <http://www.dw.com/en/bangladesh-radio-program-tackles-corruption/a-17994068>

24. <https://gc21.giz.de/ibt/var/app/wp381P/2230/index.php/bangladesh-communication-and-dialogue-about-anti-corruption-2/>

Centre for Policy Dialogue

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) is a thinktank committed to contributing towards participatory policymaking. It primarily undertakes research and analysis, organises dialogues, produces publications and supports capacity building of relevant stakeholders (CPD 2018).

CPD's research and its members have contributed to national and regional policy changes and initiatives that supported good governance, sound economic management and the interests of marginalised groups (CPD 2018). For example, Professor Rehman Sobhan, the chair and founder of CPD served as a member of the president's advisory council (CPD 2018). Other CPD researchers have also contributed to the policymaking process as members of various committees and working groups like the Bangladesh Bank, Planning Commission, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Industries and Ministry of Agriculture (CPD 2018).

CPD's on-going research areas include, but are not limited to, governance, corruption, anti-corruption and service delivery (CPD 2018). A host of its research addresses the effects corruption has for various sectors in the country. For example, in a recent article published by The Daily Star²⁵ used CPD's research on the jute sector²⁶ to highlight that corruption that was responsible for the losses in Bangladesh's pivotal economic area (Pandey 2018).

The Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (IRBD) is CPD's flagship programme that produces analyses of the macroeconomic performance of the Bangladesh economy as well as analyses and recommendations for the national budget, promoting fiscal transparency (CPD 2018). Other than this, CPD hosts meetings, conferences and special events, as well as two global initiatives – Southern Voice on Post-MDG International Development Goals and LDC IV Monitor – in partnership with leading international think-tanks (CPD) 2018).

25. <http://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/jute-day-today-reality-vs-labour-law-1544080>

26. <http://cpd.org.bd/inefficiency-corruption-responsible-loss-jute-sector-dr-moazzem/>

BRAC – Building Resources Across Communities

BRAC, also known as Building Resources Across Communities, is an international non-governmental development organisation based in Bangladesh committed to social development in nine countries in Asia and Africa (Korngold 2017; BRAC 2018a). It is also the largest global anti-poverty organisation providing microloans, self-employment opportunities, health services, education, and legal and human rights services (Korngold 2018).

BRAC engages in several social accountability initiatives²⁷ at the local level, and has its presence in all 64 districts in Bangladesh. It supports women to take control of their lives and plays an active civic role in the public sphere. It works to strengthen women-led community-based organisations, promoting pro-poor, responsive and accountable governance through a community-led development approach, and helps increase access to information (BRAC 2018a; BRAC 2018b).

Its methods include creating community-level forums ('Polli Shomaj'), through which people living in poverty can raise their voices and exercise their rights engaging through popular theatre and radio programmes, and promoting volunteers to facilitate a community agenda in local government (BRAC 2018b).

These BRAC programmes help strengthen local governance and increase accountability of administrative apparatuses.

SHUJAN – Citizens for Good Governance

Shujan, which identifies itself as a non-partisan pressure group, was founded in 2002 by a group of concerned citizens. It promotes democracy, decentralisation, electoral reforms, clean politics and accountable governance (SHUJAN 2018). It seeks to present the “voice of the people” to the government, policymakers and service-providing institutions (SHUJAN 2018). It consists of a decentralised network of committed individuals from the capital city down to the villages. It is not supported by donors but is a volunteer-based movement in which citizens invest time and money to continue its work (SHUJAN 2018).

27. <http://www.brac.net/program/community-empowerment/>

Its contributions include converting the existing electoral roll, prepared in 2000, into an online database and creating the template for an error-free electoral roll (SHUJAN 2018). Its website features election laws, a list of political parties and their manifestos plus a list of publications (SHUJAN 2018).

Diakonia

Diakonia has been working in Bangladesh since 1970, making it the first organisation registered under the government's NGO Affairs Bureau (Diakonia 2018). It operates in partnership with NGOs in Bangladesh, increasing awareness and respect for human rights and gender equality, improving access to social and economic resources. Its work is mostly focused on rural areas (Diakonia 2018).

An example of the organisation's contribution is its Effective Participation for Transparent and Accountable Local Governance²⁸ project (Jahan 2017). The project helped community members understand their rights and expectations from local government (Jahan 2017). This led to the establishment of a group in the Birgonj upazila (administrative sub-district) in Dinajpur district, which met once every three months to monitor and contribute to the work of their Union Parishad, the smallest rural administrative and local government unit in Bangladesh (Jahan 2017).

Diakonia's continues to strengthen community-based actions and support community groups such as gender development forums, social entrepreneur groups, adolescent groups, student volunteer groups and village development committees (Diakonia 2018).

28. <https://www.diakonia.se/en/How-we-work/Results-Stories-of-change/Stories-of-change/bangladesh-empowering-the-community/>

The Asia Foundation

The Asia Foundation²⁹ is a non-profit international development organisation which opened its first office in Dhaka in 1954 and has maintained a continuous presence since, working with the government, civil society, community leaders and the private sector to promote responsive and accountable governance, broad-based and inclusive economic growth, and basic rights and security (The Asia Foundation 2016a).

Through promoting labour rights and access to free legal aid in the garments and tea industries, the foundation encourages innovation and creativity in tackling community challenges, raising civic consciousness and promoting good governance among young Bangladeshis (The Asia Foundation 2016a).

The foundation programmes also build civil society capacity to promote credible elections, build trust between police and communities, engage religious and secular leaders to advance national development efforts and women's rights, and create a platform for wider discussions about the rapidly changing socio-political situation in Bangladesh (The Asia Foundation 2016a).

It has also established a 750-³⁰member youth network³¹ to help in building a national movement towards a new and positive culture of civic consciousness and participation (The Asia Foundation 2016a; The Asia Foundation 2016b).

Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA)

BELA was established in 1992 by a group of lawyers with the broad objective of promoting environmental justice and contributing to the development of sound environmental jurisprudence.

The organisation started its mission as an advocacy group of young lawyers developing legal techniques and strategies to protect the environment and

29. <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/bangladesh/>

30. <https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/bangladesh/>

31. <https://asiafoundation.org/slideshow/supporting-youth-civic-engagement-in-bangladesh/>

defend rights of communities dependent on nature and natural resources. It counters the culture of endemic corruption and impunity surrounding the abuse of natural resources (BELA 2018).

Over the years, BELA has taken on unlawful election campaigning, which led to the Bangladesh Election Commission to implement initiatives to stop election campaigning that is harmful to the environment (Chowdhury 2009). It also took on the shipbreaking industry, leading to a court verdict in 2003 that environmental clearance must be sought before engaging in any shipbreaking activity (Chowdhury 2009).

Currently, the organisation conducts research, publishes reports, engages in advocacy, capacity building and public awareness (BELA 2018). It uses legal mechanisms to file public interest litigations (PILs)³² on a wide range of issues including river pollution, industrial pollution, vehicular pollution, labour welfare, compensation for losses inflicted by development projects, encroachment and derogation of important wetlands, relocation of industries, prevention of hill cutting, conservation of forests, and defending fishermen's and farmers' rights among others (BELA 2018).

Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)

MJF is an NGO working with different stakeholders such as CSOs, other NGOs, the government, the private sector and research organisations to ensure the realisation of the rights of marginalised people, demand responsiveness of public institutions and promote good governance (Manusher Jonno 2018).

32. <http://www.belabangla.org/public-interest-litigation/>

Under its social accountability project, it has helped to create local watchdog groups in a network that takes collective action against poor governance by identifying issues and highlighting them for further advocacy work (Manusher Jonno 2017). The organisation also encourages local government institutions to adopt participatory and transparent initiatives sanctioned by law³³, informs people on how to access better services and safety net provisions by using right to information processes, and works towards a justice system that is affordable and accessible for poor and disadvantaged people (Manusher Jonno 2017). It currently operates in 31 districts (Manusher Jonno 2017).

Student groups

In April 2018, there was a surge in student activism in Bangladesh protesting against the quota system for jobs in the civil service. Currently, 56% of jobs are reserved for various groups, the most controversial of which is the 30% of jobs reserved for descendants of veterans of Bangladesh's war of secession from Pakistan in 1971 (The Economist 2018). Protestors allege that this quota system has led to widespread venality, in which patronage, clientelism and bribery are rife (Mahmud 2018). Freedom fighter certificates, which entitle the bearer to certain benefits such as preferential access public sector employment, have been repeatedly found to be fraudulently acquired, often by senior government officials (Islam 2014). Observers note that the quota system and the Bangladesh Civil Service entrance exams are "irrational, unsound, flawed and non-transparent" (Mahmud 2018).

The Chhatra Odhikar Songrokkhon Parishad (Council of Organisations for the Protection of Student Rights) began agitating against the current system in early 2018, though political divisions between different groups remain evident, as many of them are the affiliated student wings of political parties (Roy 2018).³⁴

33. For example, holding public meetings to discuss issues and seek remedies (Manusher Jonno 2017).

34. Members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling Awami League, have been accused of assaulting protesting students (The Daily Star 2018; Rahman 2018).

Others

Association of Voluntary Actions for Society (AVAS)³⁵ is a not-for-profit, non-political community-based voluntary organisation that works to strengthen local government bodies, create accountability and transparency, and reduce the level of corruption in the country (AVAS 2018). Its on-going programmes include a project on strengthening local governance (partnered with the Governance Coalition and funded by DANIDA, the Danish Development Agency). It also helped in the implementation of the Promoting Governance, Accountability, Transparency and Integrity (PROGATI)³⁶ project funded by USAID (DAI 2012; AVAS 2018).

Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK),³⁷ an NGO working for people in the remote areas of Bangladesh, has delivered skills training to nearly 2,500 elected representatives of the local Union Parishads on their role and responsibilities for better public services delivery (GUK 2018). The organisation also regularly gives training courses, orientation courses and workshops covering areas of gender and development, human rights, good governance and transparency, communication and information services (GUK 2018).

35. <http://www.avasbd.com/interventions/>

36. A project that ran from 2007 to 2012 and was carried out by DAI, an international development agency, to promote accountability, transparency and integrity in governance (DAI 2012). Its notable results include establishing a budget analysis and monitoring unit in the Bangladesh parliament, supporting the establishment of a self-sufficient anti-corruption hotline for women entrepreneurs that provided guidance on avoiding bribes and additional fees to assist women in securing business licences, tax documentation and access to credit, and establishing an independent centre for investigative journalism that provides training and access to information to journalists throughout the country (DAI 2012).

37. <http://www.gukbd.net/major-achievements/>

Finally, another initiative that takes an indirect approach to increasing social accountability is the Bangladesh Sustainability Compact³⁸, which involves the Government of Bangladesh, the European Union, the United States, Canada and the International Labour Organisation (International Labour Organisation 2018). The Sustainability Compact was launched in response to the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in 2013, and one of the key aims is to ensure respect for labour rights and workers' collective bargaining (European Commission 2013). The project is also intended to improve safety inspections of factories, and ensure such site visits are not susceptible to corruption. The third pillar of the initiative is to work towards more responsible business conduct on the part of employers (International Labour Organisation 2017).

38. http://www.ilo.org/dhaka/Whatwedo/Projects/WCMS_396191/lang--en/index.htm

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