

Project Initiated Citizen Forums at Grassroots in Bangladesh: Lessons Learned

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Received: 14 December 2015 Accepted: 1 January 2016 Published: 15 January 2016

Abstract

Bangladesh is one of the densely populated countries which recently graduated to lower-middle income country in the world. A number of donor-funded nongovernment organizations are working at grassroots for socioeconomic development since long. This article aims to diffuse major learning of project-led civic groups at grassroots level. It describes about engagement between state guardians and grassroots civil society in Bangladesh. A mixed method, applying both qualitative and quantitative methodologies was adopted to conduct fieldwork. A total of 130 respondents from civil society groups were surveyed for data collection. This paper finds that, by project interventions, citizens of remote coastal areas involved Members of Parliament (MPs), ministry, media and key actors through research, interactive policy dialogue, and networking. They have interest and significant knowledge about lives livelihoods and promoting public policy. However, organizational sustainability of such civil society groups is fragile in nature due to short duration and stereotype guidance from project. This paper concludes that project initiated civil society literally failed to achieve its main advocacy goal, that is, to promote agreed coastal policy though it improves visionary zeal and capacity among citizens. Short duration of project and political unrest are major hindering factors for institutional sustainability of grassroots civil society.

Index terms— civil society, coastal communities, parliament, public policy, well-beings.

1 Introduction

Civil society is one of the three important sectors of society, along with government and business. United Nations (2016) state that it is the "third sector" of society which comprises civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations. However, there have different definitions about civil society and contextual lenses to understand. Civil society can be defined as "a society organized voluntarily as opposed to being organized through state machinery". In simpler term, civil society can be described as "the totality of organizations formed by the citizens outside the state and the market to support aspects of social life where a common interest exists". In practice, the boundaries between state, civil society and market are often complex. Civil society commonly holds a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, NGOs, Community Based Organizations (CBOs), faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, environmental organizations, coalitions, advocacy groups and others.

When civil society mobilizes to articulate the interests of the citizenry, there is a better connection between the needs of the population and the policies of government (United Nations Development Programme 2014). Civil society has been effective in holding states politically accountable for delivering pro-poor development. But this is possible only when there are opportunities for participation with transparency and accountability. A key aspect of state-civil society interaction is how civil society influences pro-people policies and outcomes (ibid). Massuanganhe (2009) states that sustainable development cannot be realized without robust strong institutions and active citizenry engaged in key decision-making. Political leaders should promote good governance, by strengthening institutions and public participation to address national and local development agenda.

United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) states that, We recognize the importance of efforts by developing countries to strengthen leadership of their own development, national institutions, systems and capacity to ensure the best results of effective development by engaging with parliaments and citizens in shaping those policies and deepening engagement with civil society organizations. Parnini (2006) cites that in the early 1990s the donor agencies (i.e. the World Bank, the IMF, the ADB and the UNDP) involved the civil society organizations for ensuring good governance in Bangladesh for the following reasons. First, the civil society considers improvement of people's lives as the top priority and an end in itself. Second, the civil society organizations are usually independent and can act as the watchdogs by monitoring the implementation of governmental commitments in different sectors. Third, civil society can fill the legislative and policy gap by advancing anticorruption proposals that may not be supported by the political parties. Fourth: the civil society can operate on the basis of ideas rather than prestige, power and money. However, Hossain et al. (2010) assert that the current development paradigm in governance sector indicates the change to a new dimension of civil society's activism in the polity of Bangladesh. There are different ways to observe this development. A comprehensive understanding is important to major discontents in envisaging the current paradigm of functionality of CSOs. Table 1 shows a mixing political and parliamentary system of Bangladesh. Transparency International Bangladesh (2015) identified some negative trends in 10 th Parliament (2 nd -6 th Session). Those are, 1) "Main opposition" not playing an expected role in ensuring accountability of the government. 2) Irrelevant criticism and use of non-parliamentary language against the alliance or parties which have no representation in the house. 3) Absence of a strong role from the Speaker to stop nonparliamentary language and attitude of the MPs. 4) No discussion on international treaties and agreements. 5) Limited participation in the motion of legislative business, question-answer and notices on public importance. 6) Limited participation of female members in different motions. 7) Conflict of interest in case of some of the committee members. 8) Lack of access to the information in parliamentary business. 9) Irregular meeting of the standing committees. 10) Absence of any specific timeline and enforceability for implementing recommendations of the standing committees.

The overview of this article is based on a project interventions of "Coastal Peoples' Participation in Formulation of National Policies and Laws" implemented by a partner NGO i.e. Community Development Centre (CODEC), Bangladesh. The project was funded by USAID where The Asia Foundation (TAF) helped partner NGOs to implement it. The main objective of this paper is to find out major learning from donor-facilitated grassroots civil society groups; which will be useful information especially for development practitioners to work, in future, in such communities. Based on primary research done by author, this article insights on community mobilization in remote coastal areas, formal engagement of Members of Parliament (MPs), project management practices, scope and sustainability of project-led civil society groups. An endeavor is also made to pinpoint some issues of lives & livelihoods of coastal communities and parliamentary system of Bangladesh.

2 a) Project summary

As of January 2013, The Asia Foundation (TAF) issued democratic governance grants to 18 Bangladeshi Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) under Promoting Democratic Institutions and Practices (PRODIP) program. CODEC received Taka 13,109,596 (USD \$163,870, exchange rate \$1 USD = 80 Taka) to implement project from 01 August 2011 to 31 March 2014. Noteworthy, The Asia Foundation (TAF) and State University of New York's Center for International Development (SUNY/CID) implement PRODIP program that aims to increase the effectiveness and responsiveness of legislative institutions and processes in Bangladesh through two simultaneous and mutuallyreinforcing objectives. Over the periods, it focuses on assisting Parliament to improve its law making and oversight capability, strengthen its committees, increase public awareness of its functions; and create opportunities for increased public input into the development of national policy. It also helps to achieve a more constructive and sustainable role for civil society in democratic governance.

Under objective-2 of PRODIP program, "Coastal Peoples' Participation in Formulation of National Policies and Laws" project was implemented in three coastal districts i.e. Bagerhat, Barguna, and Patuakhali. It covered 10 sub-districts, that is, Bagerhat Sadar, Kachua, Mongla, Rampal, Barguna Sadar, Amtali, Bamna, Patharghata, Patuakhali Sadar, and Mirzagonj. Constituency wise: Bagerhat-2, Bagerhat-3, Barguna-1, Barguna-2, and Patuakhali-1. This project aimed to promote coastal peoples' participation in the development of effective national policies and legislative initiatives relating to the eradication of extreme poverty and protection of the environment, while at the same time strengthening the representational, legislative and oversight of area MPs to allow them to effectively pursue agreed upon policy agenda.

This project formed a total of 13

3 Materials and Methods

This research adopts a mixed method, applying both qualitative and quantitative methodologies in collecting, assessing and data analysis. Fieldwork was conducted in project working areas, that is, Bagerhat, Barguna and Patuakhali districts from May to June 2014. Project-led civil society groups i.e. members of Public Policy Forum (PPF) were key informants for data collection. Respondents' selection was done by random sampling from a table listing all 20 members of each Public Policy Forum (PPF). First, all of members were numbered from 1 to 20 and then 10 members were selected randomly. In such way, total 130 members (Male-83 and Female-47) from

13 Public Policy Forums (PPFs) were selected. Two methodological techniques; (a) quantitative survey, and (b) qualitative studies through which respondents' observation and personal interview were conducted. Activities of forums were closely observed as on 30 June 2015 to validate perception of respondents. The questionnaire for the survey centered on management of forum, capacity development, advocacy efforts, formal engagement with MPs and other actors, sustainability and impact. Graphical presentation of Public Policy Forum Index (PPFI) was prepared based on scoring of respondents.

4 III.

5 Results and Discussion

6 a) Coastal Zone of Bangladesh

Bangladesh has an area of 147,570 square kilometers and a population of about 149,772,364; making it the most densely populated country in the world. It ranked 142th, out of 187 countries, of the UN Human Development Index and has been improving over the last decade (UNDP 2014).

Bangladesh has a coastline of 710 kilometers and an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). There are different views on the delimitation of the coastal areas. The conventional view is that the land that is inundated by the high and low tides is called the coastal belt. Total 19 districts of the country are being affected directly or indirectly by some of these phenomena. The districts are considered including all upazilas (sub-district)/thanas (police station). A total of 48 upazilas/thanas in 12 districts are exposed to the sea and/or lower estuaries, are defined as the exposed coast and the remaining 99 of the coastal districts are termed interior coast (WARPO 2005). Over the periods, Government of Bangladesh (GoB) realigned jurisdictions and declared some new administrative units. Now 161 upazilas/thanas are comprised in 19 coastal districts (Ministry of Public Administration 2013 & Bangladesh Police 2013).

Coastal areas of Bangladesh face with several natural hazards like cyclone, storm surge, flood etc. In addition, there have man-made different hazards like arsenic, water-logging and salinity in water & agricultural land. Noteworthy, this zone has diverse eco-systems: mangrove, marine, estuary, islands, coral, sandy beaches, sand dunes and has both 'world heritage sites' and 'ecologically critical areas'. Coastal zone offers immense potential for economic growth. Renewable and nonrenewable energy, marine resources, beach minerals tourism are some of the less explored areas. People of coastal areas are still braved and struggling with many odds. Now days the threat of cyclonic storm like Sidr, Aila and tidal wave and cyclone of 1970, 1991, 2007 and 2008 has become a permanent phenomenon in their life. The Constitution of Bangladesh bestows special provision for development of disadvantaged areas including remote coastal areas. Moreover, a total of 87 Members of Parliament (MPs) were directly elected in ninth parliamentary election from coastal districts. Despite having potentials, socioeconomic conditions of coastal communities remain disappointing and, in some extents, improving steadily.

7 b) Public Policy Forum (PPF)

Each Public Policy Forum (PPF) was formed by comprising 20 members; representing from diversified backgrounds like teacher, advocate, social leader, local doctor, women activist, journalist, NGO activist, CBO leader, cultural activist, environmentalist, association leader, ethnic minority, representative working for Persons With Disabilities (PWD), youth representative, retired government official. PRODIP project gave financial and technical support to form Public Policy Forum (PPF). It is found that 28 percent respondents of forums were directly engaged with political party. Majority of respondents were involved with local organizations like women association, professional group, CBO, and etc. A number of respondents (21 percent) were involved with ten to more organizations. Significantly, MPs do not seek to control forums; but like the PPFs by positioning loyal party members as insiders in a portion. Membership reflects supporters of both major political parties in Bangladesh. It is quite difficult to avoid few less-committed participants at district and sub-district level due to unavoidable circumstance and silent facts; in practice, it is wise to tactically deal them as a gateway to engage MPs. ? Sustainable management of natural resources: exploiting untapped and less explored opportunities

? Improving livelihood conditions of people; especially women

8 ? Environmental conservation

? Empowerment through knowledge management

? Creating an enabling institutional environment Revitalizing of CDS, an intensive consultative document, or formulation of such zone focused strategic planning was main advocacy agenda of PPF. Members of PPF emphasized on their long-term commitment to specific advocacy issue. However, PPF literally failed to revitalize a comprehensive plan for coast. Respondents reveal that weak national platform, that is, 'Coastal Caucus', short duration of project, massive political unrest are major reasons for such failure. A total of 88.5 percent respondents believe that periodical meetings of PPF will not be continued and sustained without support from project. Brand of Public Policy Forum (PPF) will not be heard in future. However, in observation, it is found that Bagerhat District Public Policy Forum (DPPF) still continue their events on local advocacy issues. Majority of respondents

(90.00 percent) acknowledge that project-led capacity development initiatives for local civil society will help for vision sustainability, transforming knowledge, and merging with other formal and non-formal bodies.

9 d) Capacity building

Project personnel and external experts facilitated training for members of PPF. Civil Society-Driven Advocacy; and Advanced Women Leadership Development trainings were organized by Institute of Governance Studies (IGS) of BRAC, a reputed NGO in Bangladesh. Majority of respondents (93.08 percent) state that they were benefited from more advanced training contents and materials. National convention of PPF and exposure visits helped them for alliance building and networking among them.

10 e) Engagement of MPs and media

Initiatives of PPF contributed to formalize policy dialogue between citizens and MPs, as well as focusing policy conversations on national level advocacy goal. Total 86.92 percent respondents mention that their relationships with policymakers have been expanded or strengthened as a result of involvement in the PRODIPsupported initiative. In most cases, PPF members maintain direct contact with MPs from their constituencies. They track schedules of MPs and conduct individual meetings when MPs return to their constituencies on the weekends. MPs raised local demands, as for example-preventing nuisance of sea pirates, special allocation and Identity Card (ID) for fishermen, improving health services at remote coastal pockets, in Parliament. Total 70.77 percent respondents reveal that members of PPF were able to engage local media in favor of advocacy issue like news coverage, feature on coast. However, 40.00 percent of respondents remark that members of PPF had less connection with national media.

11 g) Lessons learned

? There is a substantial amount of tacit knowledge within members of PPF which make important contributions to policy research and monitoring. Unfortunately, in agenda-building perspective, participation and space of grassroots civil society is narrow-down at national level.

? Project personnel had value formal communication with MPs, but lack knowledge about the parliamentary oversight process.

? PPF contributed to formalize policy dialogue between citizens and MPs, and raised local demands in Parliament. But they did not success to influence Ministry, which is most important in the context of Bangladesh.

? Dealing with political parties is challenging; but working with them are very important for political empowerment of grassroots people. NGO should not directly affiliate with any political party.

? Two video documentaries on lives & livelihoods of coastal communities, policy research, Participatory Action Research (PAR) were helpful to sensitize relevant stakeholders and actors.

? Coastal belt is vast in nature. 'Coastal Caucus' did not significantly represent different geographical settings. Proper networking was not established due to short period of project.

? It is important to create 'Information Bank' on facts and figures of coast and ensure open access for all.

? Gender friendly atmosphere was observed in each Public Policy Forum (PPF).

? Dependency on project personnel for keeping meeting minutes and organizing other events.

? The project was cost effective and efficient; members PPF and stakeholders appreciated for it.

? If grassroots citizens do not see sustainable promising progress due to short time of project then negative attitude will be formed at communities in long-run.

IV.

12 Conclusion

This field based study finds that donors have more attention to NGOs as a civil society organizations rather than grassroots civic groups. However, coastal zone of Bangladesh is relatively income-poor in comparison with rest of the country. Some districts and sub-districts are located at poverty pocket that were identified by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB). This paper proves that grassroots civil society have attention and knowledge about lives & livelihoods issues. Project-driven civil society initiatives enhance formal engagement of policymakers to significantly hear voices of citizen. It helps for vision exercise, awareness and capacity building for policy promotion. Short duration of project and political unrest are major hindering factors relating to institutional sustainability of such emerging civil society forums at grassroots level.

Appendix: Questionnaire ¹

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Figure 1:

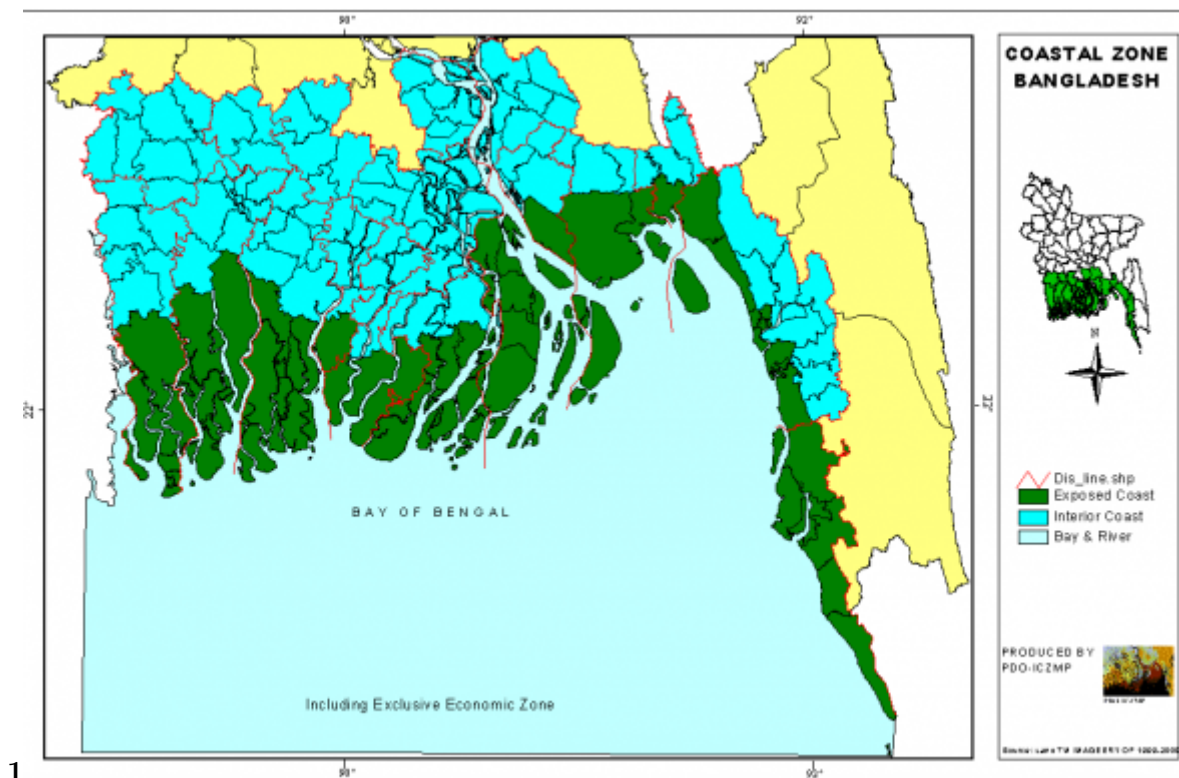


Figure 2: Figure 1 :

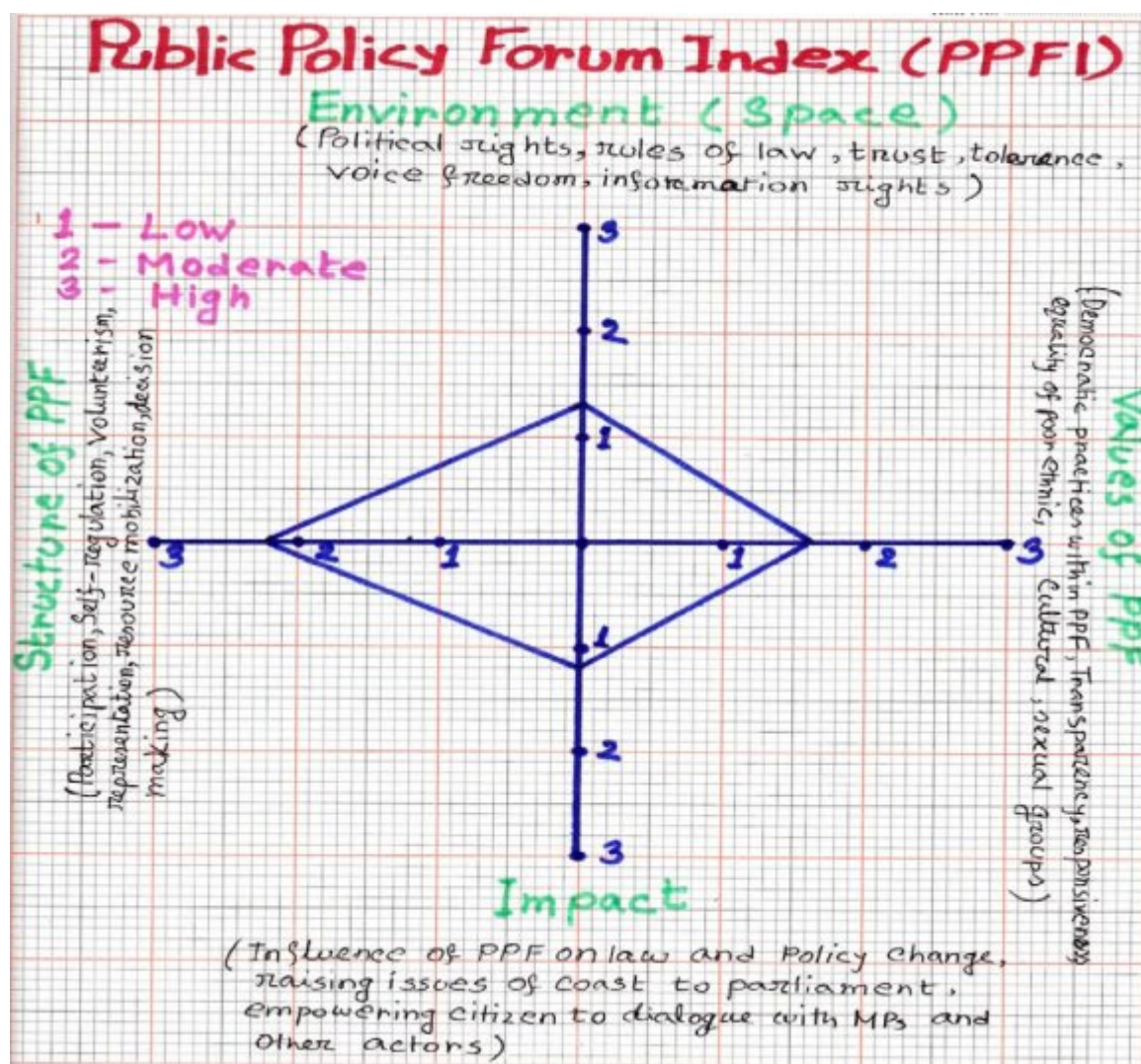


Figure 3:

1

Parliament	Date of First Session	Date of Dissolution	Political System		Tenure (Months)
			Elected Party	Majority	
		1972-1974: Parliamentary Democracy Provisional Constitutional Order 1972 Bangladesh Constitution 1972			
First	07 April 1973	06 November 1975	Awami (AL)	League	30
	January 1975: Presidential form of Government, 4 th Amendment of the Constitution 1975-1981: Military Rule (Presidential form of Government)				
Second	02 April 1979	24 March 1982	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)		35
	1981-1982: Civilian Rule (Presidential form of Government) 1982-1990: Military Rule (Presidential form of Government)				
Third	10 July 1986	06 December 1987	Jatiya Party (JP)		17
Fourth	25 April 1988	06 December 1990	Jatiya Party (JP)		31
	1991: Restoration of Parliamentary Democracy				
Fifth	05 April 1991	24 November 1995	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)		56
Sixth	19 March 1996	30 March 1996	Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)		12 days
Seventh	14 July 1996	13 July 2001	Awami (AL)	League	60
Eighth	28 October 2001	27 October 2006	BNP-led Party Alliance	Four	60
	2007-2008: Military-backed Caretaker Government				
Ninth	25 January 2009	24 January 2014	AL-led Grand Alliance		60
Tenth	29 January 2014	Ongoing	AL-led Grand Alliance		-

Source: Centre for Policy Dialogue 2012; Bangladesh Parliament 2013

Figure 4: Table 1 :

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[Note: geographical coverage, households and population of coastal districts. It is found that 28.42 percent of total population of Bangladesh lived in coastal districts in 2001. Growth rate of population has been declined due to lack of employment opportunities, livelihood problems and social challenges.]

Figure 5: Table 1 shows

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Categories	Area (km ²)	Households	Population (Adjusted)		
			2001	2011	2011
Coastal districts	47,201	6,904,728	8,242,484	37,048,411	40,038,963
Bangladesh	147,570	25,490,816	32,173,630	130,354,060	149,772,364
Percentage	31.99	27.09	25.62	28.42	26.73
Source: Bangladesh Population and Housing Census 2011					

Figure 6: Table 1 :

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