Learning & Policy Series

Promoting Inclusive Governance in Bangladesh: Empowering the extreme poor

Donors, governments and civil society need to invest in empowering the poorest to participate in local governance.

CARE Bangladesh has identified poor governance as an underlying cause of poverty and exclusion among women and men of the country's extreme poor. The social inequalities that shape different forms of exploitation and discrimination ensure that decision-making power remains in the hands of power-holders among the elites. Achieving more inclusive governance requires a more empowered citizenry, particularly in the poorer segments of society, a change in the mindset of formal and informal power-holders, and spaces for citizens to participate in and deliberate on public affairs.

This briefing paper highlights key findings from in-depth research on the DFID funded Nijera Botlagari Good Governance Initiative in Botlagari Union, north-west Bangladesh implemented by CARE Bangladesh and Ramnathpur Bahumukhi Nabayan Sangha (RBNS).[1] The initiative facilitates social, economic and political empowerment processes with extremely poor women and men, building their capacity to raise their voice and hold the Union Parishad (UP) council accountable for protecting and enhancing their rights. The initiative also promoted improved engagement between the UP council and citizens, leading to its greater responsiveness.

The initiative has created an alternative power base from among marginalised groups now able to advocate and create pressure for their own interests. The changes seen in Botlagari Union, summarised below, show how more inclusive governance can be achieved through integrated programming to strengthen voice, support spaces

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for participation, and forge new accountability relationships between the state and extremely poor citizens. The experience of the initiative also underlines the importance of addressing the inequalities that cause poverty and enabling the poor to represent their own interests in the public domain.

1. Understanding inclusive governance
Inclusive governance means incorporating diverse voices and bringing decision-making closer to citizens, broadening and deepening the influence of citizens. At its core are more accountable relationships between state and citizens and greater voice and representation of groups that usually exist outside decision-making processes.

Voice is the capacity of individuals to express their views and participate in the decisions affecting their lives, as well as the formal and informal channels they can use to do this. Recognition of the importance of voice has

Key points

Strengthening spaces for participation and tackling the inequalities that cause poverty are crucial for creating the conditions for inclusive governance.

[1] More detailed analysis and findings are presented in Hinton, R (2010) "Promoting Inclusive Governance in Bangladesh: Empowering the Extreme Poor"

led to the proliferation of spaces for citizen participation in decision-making at all levels. But the existence of such a space does not mean that all citizens are equally capable of expressing their views, as there may be individual, structural and relational factors which can lead some people to have greater voice than others. These inequalities in power relations must be addressed if efforts to raise the voice of marginalised citizens are to promote greater equality in the experience

Natural leaders play a key role in mobilising and encouraging their communities to take action.

"Khushi Begum [a natural leader] speaks for us in our area. If we have some allocations for relief support [from the UP] she makes the list and speaks with the UP for us."

A woman from Duba para.

and practice of citizenship.

As well as having intrinsic value, voice also has instrumental value as one of the constituent dimensions of enhanced accountability. However, state accountability also requires the state to have the capacity to respond to and engage its citizens, transparency in its procedures and information, and receptivity and responsiveness to the diverse needs of citizens. Often the state at all levels is more accountable to powerful interests than the demands and rights of poorer segments of society.

2. The Nijera Botlagari Good Governance Initiative in Botlagari Union

The Nijera Botlagari Good Governance Initiative promoted inclusive governance by opening up spaces for citizen participation and deliberation in public affairs, working closely with the UP body to enhance their capacity and willingness to engage and listen to citizens, particularly extremely poor people. The initiative is part of the broader Nijeder Janyia Nijera (We, For Ourselves) project, which facilitated empowerment processes with extremely poor women and men. Using the principles of community solidarity, the approach targeted the poorest paras (hamlets), guiding people through three stages leading from (1) analysis of their environment, condition, and resources; to (2) self-realisation, the articulation of their own vision of development and strengthening their capacity to act in pursuit of their self-defined goals; and finally to (3) solidarity, or collective action to achieve this vision of development.

Emerging from this process are leaders from among the poor ('natural leaders') who are able to motivate and support others in their communities to undertake collective action. This solidarity of the extreme poor has led to economic initiatives, collective action to renegotiate unfair wage practices with landlords, and action to eradicate open defecation in communities (see Box A).

The initiative has promoted dialogue between state and citizens through strengthening or creating a number of participatory spaces, which include:

- **The Natural Leader Forum:** a union-wide platform of natural leaders established to strengthen their voice in negotiations with power-holders and to provide organisational support to individuals and communities.

Box A: Case Study: Sonnashi Para's access to justice
By Arjuman Ara Begam

Sonnashi Para is a very poor and small para in Ward #7, Botlagari Union, consisting of 38 households. The main professions are playing the drum in weddings and midwifery. This para has been part of the project's community solidarity approach since 2005. They also have very strong and active natural leaders. One night, an incident took place where a man from a rich neighbouring para came and entered the house of a young married woman. Her neighbours came to know what was happening and called the UP Member who lived nearby, but instead of supporting them he started beating the villagers. The natural leaders from Sonnashi Para organised a community meeting to decide what to do. With the UP Chairman away in Dhaka, they decided to approach the Combined Military Force. Ten women filed a case against the perpetrator with the military, which instructed the Chairman to deal with this case appropriately. The case was heard in shalishkar (village court) and the Chairman and elders fined the perpetrator 8,000 Taka, which was paid to the victim.

- **Gram Sabha assemblies:** annual public meetings at the ward (sub-union) level that provide space for citizens to interact with and question their elected representatives on local issues.
- **Participatory planning and budgeting:** an annual process involving all interested citizens in identifying and prioritising issues and scrutinising and monitoring public expenditure against budgets.
- **UP evaluation:** a biannual process in which the UP council's performance is evaluated by both itself and by the Natural Leader Forum, providing essential feedback on its members' responsiveness and accountability.
- **UP skills development workshops:** in the earlier stages of the project these focused on inculcating a pro-poor attitude and commitment to the ideas of community empowerment and participatory governance. More recently they have centred on enhancing the UP's prioritisation and planning and identifying ways to support the extreme poor.
- **Standing Committees:** legally-constituted committees at the UP level which look at development planning across the union. There are 13 sectoral sub-committees with members from both local government and the community, each led by a UP member.
- **Joint targeting of government services:** an important innovation of the initiative is the inclusion of community-based organisations and natural leaders in the targeting of government services such as safety net programmes.

3. Key findings on inclusive governance in Botlagari Union

Research for this paper used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore the changes seen in Botlagari Union over the period of the Good Governance Initiative. A comparative analysis was carried out across five unions where community solidarity processes have been facilitated in order to assess the effect of the Good Governance Initiative's additional focus on promoting participation, voice and accountability. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions and case study analyses were conducted with key stakeholders to unpack the nature of the changes observed in Botlagari Union. A survey to measure voice and accountability was carried out with 200 community members: 50 people randomly selected from each of a rich, a middle and a poor well-being category, plus all 50 natural leaders in the union. Finally, a time series study was conducted on the targeting of a government service, the distribution of Vulnerable Group

Feeding (VGF) programme cards, to quantify changes in government responsiveness and accountability to the extreme poor.

Key findings:
The voice of the most marginalised, and particularly women, has been promoted

The research found that marginalised people experienced significant changes individually and in relation to social, cultural and political institutions. The natural leaders were found to be much more active in engaging with the UP council than people from the rich, middle, and poor sample groups: 76% report they often meet their UP member compared to 68% for the rich sample group. The proportion reporting seeing positive change in their contact with the UP over the course of the project was highest for natural leaders (74%) and lowest for the rich sample group (50%). Among both the natural leader

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and the poor sample groups, the positive change was stronger among women than men, whereas the gender effect was reversed for the better-off groups. Natural leaders were also more likely to use opportunities to feedback on UP performance than any other groups (86%), and again the effect was stronger for poor women than poor men, regardless of whether they are natural leaders. Natural leaders expressed greater ability to raise their voice and express their demands in public spheres than before the project began. Critical to this change is both their roles and skills as leaders and the solidarity that now exists among the poor, meaning natural leaders are not raising voice alone but as representatives of their communities.

Natural leaders have increased the access of extremely poor people to resources.

There are more spaces and opportunities to participate

There are more functioning spaces for citizen participation in Botlagari Union than in the other unions surveyed. The only other surveyed union which had functioning spaces was Saptibari Union. A much higher percentage of the extreme poor are also participating in Botlagari Union (35%) than in Saptibari Union (3%). Natural leaders reported greater awareness and knowledge of UP plans and budgets than other sample populations, with a stronger positive effect among women than men.

Local government decision-making is more responsive

Poor citizens' increased voice, as well as their oversight and monitoring activities, was widely felt to have resulted in a more responsive UP body, with natural leaders and UP members stating that the targeting and allocation of government services and resources had improved. Groups of the extreme poor in the union had been supported by the UP to access public land and water bodies for collective income generation activities. This finding was corroborated by the high number of successful negotiations for access to resources
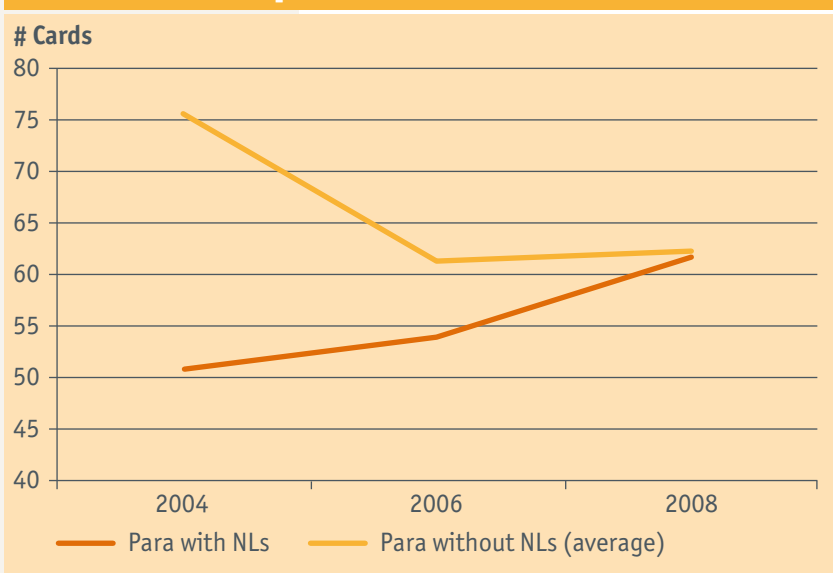

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by groups of the extreme poor in Botlagari Union compared to the other unions (see table 1).

The time series data on VGF card distribution also suggested positive changes. Cards were increasingly being targeted to the paras in which the natural leaders live – the poorest hamlets (see figure 1). The sample sizes are too small to provide conclusive evidence of significant change, but the data clearly suggest that natural leaders are able to influence card allocations to their paras, as even when the actual number of cards decreased the proportion of cards to paras where natural leaders live increased.

Transformation of formal and informal institutions

Natural leaders, particularly women, are experiencing higher social status, reporting feeling more confident and "important". They are arbitrating disputes, including in the previously out of reach domain of shalish. They are increasingly recognised by the UP as representatives of the poor and as such are included in planning and decision-making processes. Together these findings strongly suggest that the initiative has facilitated a transformation in social, cultural and formal institutions in Botlagari Union.

4. Implications for inclusive governance practice

These findings have important implications for practices and policies promoting inclusive governance in Bangladesh, but also potentially in other contexts. This initiative has provided insight into the mechanisms for including extremely poor people into decision-making processes in Bangladesh, which can also have a bearing on efforts to promote inclusive governance elsewhere.

Table 1:
Successful negotiations with UP by the extreme poor

	No. of groups successfully negotiating access to public resources	Percentage of women members	Total no. of members
Botlagari	9	64%	128
Rajendrapur	3	67%	15

Figure 1: Changes in distribution of VGF cards over time by intervention status of para

Cards

— Para with NLs   — Para without NLs (average)

Implications:

The barriers the extreme poor face must be recognised and addressed

The experience of citizenship is intrinsically tied up with the social, economic and cultural dimensions of power and identity. Their identity as citizens has been submerged under that of being the beneficiaries of welfare and charity. The Good Governance Initiative has challenged power relations and identities, building community solidarity and leadership among the poorest, and changing how individuals view themselves and are viewed by others. Tackling the causes of exclusion – through solidarity and leadership of the poor – is essential to ensure the meaningful participation of extremely poor people.

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The extreme poor should be advocates for their own rights

The results of this research demonstrate the value of the extreme poor advocating for their own rights and entitlements. In Botlagari Union they are using alternative spaces such as the Natural Leader Forum to debate and define their positions on issues, and they are participating and deliberating in public spaces with power-holders, particularly the UP council. It is essential to promote the political agency of the extreme poor so they are able to define the subjects that are important to them, make demands and negotiate for their own interests. It is only through this that their interests will be represented; elites cannot be expected to represent the interests of the poor especially where these clash with their own.

Spaces for participation are crucial for creating the conditions for inclusive governance

Through participation the extreme poor of Botlagari Union have learnt to raise their voice, develop their political agency and become active citizens. The spaces strengthened and created by the initiative provided citizens with the opportunity to make demands, monitor UP performance and enhance dialogue, while a focus on empowering the poorest made it possible for them to participate on a more equal basis with richer groups. Solidarity and leadership amongst extremely poor people are essential conditions for inclusive governance, but in the absence of spaces to participate, voice will not naturally emerge.

Participation resulted in better government

The findings suggest that government decision-making improved in Botlagari Union and more resources and services reached the extreme poor. The UP body arguably prioritised the demands of the poor in its planning processes, supporting the conclusion that participation leads to improved development outcomes for the poorest.

Decentralisation reforms should ensure substantive citizen participation

The Botlagari Union experience demonstrates what can be achieved by promoting inclusive governance and integrating the extreme poor into local decision-making, even against the backdrop of very limited decentralisation of power in Bangladesh. This project provides exciting insights into the opportunities for devolution in the country, and also some of the conditions necessary to ensure that decentralisation results in greater responsiveness, effectiveness and accountability.

These conditions are an empowered citizenry that includes the extreme poor and mechanisms to promote citizen participation in decision-making and monitoring UP performance. The combined effects of these conditions are to improve the responsiveness of local governance and to reduce the opportunity for rent-seeking behaviour and corruption. In the context of ongoing reforms of sub-national government in Bangladesh, Botlagari Union is an example of what could be achieved by pluralising governance and privileging the diverse voices and knowledge of historically marginalised people.

5. Conclusion

The message from CARE Bangladesh's experience is that it is crucial for donors, government and civil society to invest in empowering the poorest to participate, overcoming the barriers caused by poverty and power inequalities. With this investment poor, marginalised and excluded people can articulate their own demands and are no longer solely reliant on others, including international agencies, to represent their interests in the public domain.

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