Journey for Advancement in Transparency, Representation and Accountability (JATRA)

CARE Bangladesh is implementing the Journey for Advancement in Transparency, Representation and Accountability (JATRA) project. The project aims to strengthen the Union Parishads’ (Lowest tier of local government) public finance management systems so that they are more transparent and aligned with the Local Government Act 2009. The project endeavors to ensure active participation of the community leaders, especially women, in key decision making spaces and bodies. Moreover, JATRA strives to allow the wider community to play an active role in social accountability mechanisms to ensure inclusive democratic processes, equal access to quality services and access to accurate information at all levels of Union Parishad.

Assessment of Information Flows in the Union Parishads of Bangladesh - Executive summary

In Bangladesh, it is widely acknowledged that the weak information sharing process between Union Parishads and citizens contributes to ineffective civic participation in local governance, which creates scope for unfair distribution of services. The poor and marginalized often refrain from claiming their rights and entitlements because of the lack of access to relevant information. The result is the absence of active participation and the collective voice of citizens, which allows unfair, hidden public spending deals to take place. Therefore access to information is fundamental to strengthening citizens’ roles in promoting transparent and participatory governance.

This study endeavors to find out potential ways to respond to the aforementioned situation at the rural level by assessing the two-way information flow between the UPs and the citizens, in relation to budget expenditure and services. The study consulted the UPs — information providers — and the citizens — information recipients — to identify and recommend ways for more effective and efficient information flows in their respective unions. This study is in line with the Rights to Information Act (RTI) 2009, which calls for increasing transparency and accountability in all public, autonomous and statutory organizations and in private organizations run on government or foreign funding, therefore decreasing corruption and establishing good governance.

The main objectives of this study are:
A. To analyze the effectiveness of existing mechanisms and practices in ensuring the accessible and regular flow of accurate information at Union level on UPs’ budget, public expenditure and the service provision.
B. To identify the potential strategies for improving the flow of information at Union level in compliance with the RTI Act 2009.

The study covered the 15 Unions in the Nilphamari and Gaibandha districts where the JATRA project is being implemented. To collect field-level information, the study team interviewed UP officials, UP secretaries and UISC (Union Information Service center) entrepreneurs for the supply side as well as teachers, farmers, journalists and development workers for the demand side. 10 national level experts on issues related to local government and communications have also been consulted to gather a macro-level perspective on the subject.

The study has used information from both primary and secondary sources and the analysis has followed both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The research team conducted face-to-face interviews with the UP secretary and an UISC entrepreneur in each union, using a structured questionnaire with both open and close ended questions. Concurrently, the team reviewed and analyzed the website and citizen charter of each of the 15 UPs by using an observation checklist. Focal Group Discussions were facilitated by the research team to evaluate the UPs’ performance. Some groups were comprised of civil society members, whilst others of UP officials, UP secretaries and UISC entrepreneurs. A literature review and the e-interviews of experts took place simultaneously to the field-level data collection. 40 renowned local governments and communication specialists were selected and invited to participate in structured e-interviews to provide their expert opinion on the subject.

The Local Government (UP) Act 2009 forms the legal basis for ensuring effective information flow at the union level. The act details the process for collecting and disseminating information and determines the roles and responsibilities of various actors in this process. The act also contains an innovative and unique provision on the formation and functions of the Ward Shava (Formal citizen meeting with elected UP representatives). The formation of ward shava has created the opportunity for citizens to express their opinions and for the UPs to collect information about the needs and priorities of citizens.
Flow of information process to UPs

Ward shava is both a forum and process of collecting information from citizens and presenting it in the UP meetings. However, only 9 out of 15 unions make regular efforts to ensure peoples’ participation at the ward shavas. A third of the UPs secretaries claimed that they endeavored to use the ward shavas for needs assessment as well as selecting and validating projects. However, findings from the focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews with the UP members and civil society indicated that in all the UPs, citizens had very limited scope for participating in the selection process of projects/schemes. Such decisions are instead made mostly by the UPs’ chairperson and members in consultation with local elites. Furthermore, two-thirds of the UPs use a lottery system to select beneficiaries of social safety nets rather than discussing this within the ward shavas. Inactivity of relevant committees, political interference and the absence of representatives of poor and extreme poor in respective committees have been identified by the FGD respondents as the major constraints in ensuring participation of the citizens in the beneficiary selection process.

Receiving information from government line departments is also an important issue for the UPs. Key challenges were identified including receiving the information on time, receiving clear and common instructions from multiple government departments, and using the internet for sending and accessing information.

Preservation and maintenance of information by UPs

The Rights to Information Act 2009 requires UPs to keep all relevant information for a certain time period. Each of the 15 UPs maintain at least 6 databases for birth and death registration, VGF, old age allowance program, allowance for widow and divorced women, allowance for poor disabled and TR (Test Relief). But a much higher number of databases must be maintained by the UPs. The major limitations faced by UPs in maintaining databases on various UP functions were identified as: 1) absence of fund allocation for maintaining information, 2) inadequate equipment and logistics, and 3) lack of skilled human resources for operating computers.

Preparedness of UP in implementing RTI

Although proactive disclosure of information does not necessarily ensure that it reaches the citizens, it has its own importance in terms of transparency. Available literature shows some UPs already have set a good example of proactively disclosing a range of information. Findings from the interviews and the FGDs show that the UPs are using a wide range of media, including their website, notice boards, leaflets, ward shava, open budget meetings and courtyard meetings to proactively disclose information. The UPs, however, do not disclose information on some important issues including public expenditure, accomplished and planned activities, statistics related to the income-based classification of families and details of development works in the sectors of health, education and communication undertaken by NGOs and CBOs in the unions. Two important factors that constraint UPs in their information dissemination were identified: lack of funds and UP officials’ negligence and lack of skills.

The RTI Act 2009 has been enacted to ensure citizens’ right to information. However, according to the UP secretaries, none of the targeted 15 UPs have received any guidelines for information sharing under the RTI Act since its enactment in 2009. Evidence from relevant literature shows that UPs generally follow different procedures for providing citizens’ access to records, however gaps still exist. These are due to 1) lack of understanding of the RTI Act among UP officials, lack of awareness among citizens on the RTI Act 2009, 3) lack of initiatives from the UPs to raise mass awareness on the RTI Act 2009, 4) unavailability of updated information in UP, 5) limited resources, 6) institutional restrictions.

UISC and flow of information at Union level

A number of initiatives have been taken by the government of Bangladesh to introduce various e-government services using Information and Communication Technology (ICT). UISC is one such service initiated to increase rural dwellers’ access to information and technology; as an ICT enabled one-stop service outlets that provide three types of services: government, information and commercial services. UISCs must maintain databases of information; however, this is not done to the extent mandated by the RTI. Furthermore, UISCs must support UPs in the preparation of their annual development plan, in selecting projects and schemes and preparing proposals as well as preparing, documenting and maintaining databases for beneficiaries’ lists of safety net and other welfare programs. UISCs are also a very helpful tool for helping poor rural dwellers to meet their basic information need by providing them information-based services as well as other services.

In providing the required services, the UISCs often face many difficulties. Major challenges have been identified including maintaining uninterrupted electricity, ensuring reasonable internet speed, improving entrepreneurs’ technical skills and getting adequate support from local administration.

Conclusion

Under the present legal provision and framework, the ward shava seems to be the most effective platform to maintain the flow of information between citizens and UPs. However, although most of the UPs are organizing the ward shavas out of legal obligation, most of them are not ensuring the platform is used efficiently for its intended purpose. Lack of initiatives from the UPs in organizing and facilitating the ward shavas and engaging the citizens are the major limitations of the supply side. This results in poor and unprepared participation of the demand side in the ward shavas. Ultimately, the existing mechanisms are not serving as efficient channels for citizens to provide information about their needs and priorities to UPs. The UPs lack the capacity and willingness to collect and maintain information database relating to their functions and services. Both the UPs and the citizens are often unaware about the rights to and the process of obtaining information from UPs by the citizens and the RTI Act is therefore not being utilized properly by the demand side. Whilst the UISCs do play an important role in making some information accessible to the citizens, they face financial and logistical challenges. Planned and combined efforts by civil society, local government and national government institutes can change this situation. Such efforts would also help materialize the current government’s mandate to digitalize the country and make necessary information available to citizens.