



Localising the SDGs in Bangladesh

Bangladesh made outstanding progress during the era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Will it continue its progress and achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

There are reasons for both optimism and concern. The Bangladeshi people are resilient and creative, finding innovative and low-cost solutions and empowering individual 'agency' especially of women to meet the challenges of school enrolment, public health and poverty reduction.¹ Bangladesh has large-scale service providers both inside and outside government. Yet issues such as climate change, corruption and other governance failures, institutional weaknesses and growing violence threaten further progress.

Bangladesh is not the only country facing these obstacles to future progress. Hence, the SDGs go beyond the MDGs, and focus directly on meeting these new challenges.

Why 'localise' the SDGs?

Although primary accountability for the SDGs belongs to nations, the SDGs explicitly call for action by local authorities. At least 12 of the 17 SDGs – excepting 9, 12, 13, 14 and 17 – require integrated strategies at the community level to overcome the interlinked challenges of poverty, ill-health, social ills and environmental destruction. Fortunately, Bangladesh's constitution wisely placed key responsibilities for social and economic development, including "the preparation and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development" at the level closest to the people, with the local government bodies, particularly the union parishad (UP), the body at the doorstep of the people [Article 59(2) (c)].

This constitutional mandate makes it imperative that Bangladesh localise the SDGs – that is, it must equip the UPs with the skills and resources to analyse their local situation, set priorities for each of the relevant SDGs, and track and report their progress.

The Local Government (UP) Act of 2009 ("the Act") strengthens the local government by incorporating the global best practices for direct participation of active citizens in planning and social accountability, through ward shavas (meetings) for participatory planning, citizen charter, open budget meetings and annual reporting.

SDG 16 – the goal that makes all goals possible

The SDG 16 explicitly calls for "peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" (which includes the community level). Target 16.7 is to "ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels." Goal 16 is therefore the crown-jewel of the SDGs, and the achievement of other goals depends on it to a significant extent.

¹ Mahmud, W., Asadullah, M. N. and Savoia, A. (2013) Bangladesh's achievements in social development indicators: Explaining the puzzle. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 48 (44). pp. 26–28.

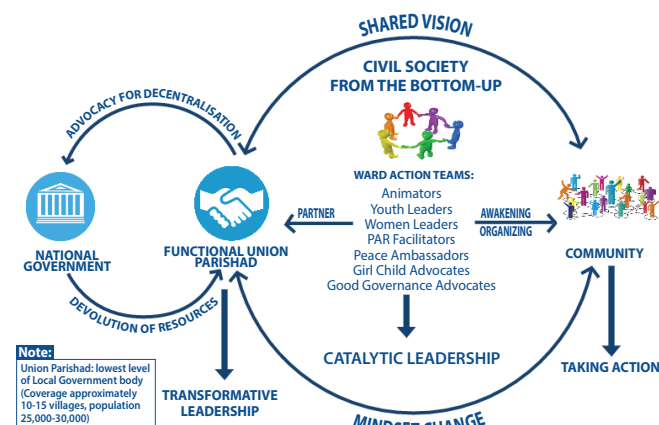
SDG Target 16.7 requires citizen's voice in decision-making, which for most citizens can only effectively happen at the UP and village levels.²

Achieving SDGs in the light of SDG 16

The Hunger Project-Bangladesh (THP), which played a role in pioneering the reforms incorporated in the 2009 UP Act, has set itself the task of working in partnership with the local government to develop a package of community mobilisation and capacity-building interventions known as the 'SDG Union Strategy' to demonstrate how fully implementing the Act can achieve the SDGs. THP has been demonstrating the function of this innovative model in 185 unions, 61 of which are supported by BRAC, as a low-cost solution and sustainable means of achieving the SDGs.

The SDG Union Strategy calls for a partnership between: (a) the people; (b) their elected representatives at the local level; (c) a civil society created from the ground up; and (d) the government functionaries responsible for delivering services to the grassroots. These stakeholders are brought together by a shared vision to achieve the SDGs at the union level.

Community-Led SDG Union Strategy



Role of the people

People in 'SDG Unions', including the women and the youth, are awakened and mobilised to make them active as citizens and take action to achieve SDGs. Mobilisation of people create 'social capital', which can make up for lack of 'financial capital', and can be used for solving many social problems through social movements and social resistance. Community members carry out various campaigns, such as resisting child marriage, violence against

women, substance abuse, environmental degradation and so on. Using the participatory action research (PAR) methodology, the poorest of the poor are also mobilised to become 'barefoot researchers' to identify the causes of their poverty, form 'self-help groups (SHGs)', and take other actions necessary to end their own hunger and poverty. Mobilisation of the poor is designed to ensure that "no one is left behind."

Role of the UP representatives

UP representatives, receiving both statutory and transformational training, provide catalytic leadership not only to mobilise people, but also to ensure that the services people are entitled to actually reach them. UPs belonging to the SDG Unions sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to make the achievement of SDGs their priority, make the entire UP body functional, make standing committees effective, and ensure social justice. They, among others, hold ward shavas, open budget meetings and prepare five-year plans.

Role of the local civil society

The local civil society is consisted of about 150 or so volunteers, including animators, women leaders, youth leaders, PAR facilitators, champions for good governance and peace ambassadors. The members of the civil society, on the one hand, act as watchdog over the UPs, and at the same time, work in partnership with the UP representatives. They also empower and mobilise the community members to ensure inclusive decision-making and arrange skills training to help them become authors of their own future.

Role of the government functionaries

Local-level government functionaries work with the community members to give them 'accesses' to the available government services, make those services 'affordable', and deliver those with accountability, so that an 'enabling environment' is created for people to succeed.³

These four stakeholders, working together, create a community-led development approach to achieve the SDGs. A recent study by four academics from Columbia, Princeton and Cambridge Universities, published in the Proceedings of the American Academy of Sciences, found that the 'community trust' – created through this approach in our working area – positively affect the poor's economic decision-

²Coonrod, J. (2016) Participatory local democracy: Key to community-led rural development. *Development*. 58 (2-3). pp. 333-340.

³The Hunger Project. (1994) *What constitutes an enabling environment for the poor to succeed in their own development?* Available from: <https://communityled-dev.org/1994/04/01/what-constitutes-an-enabling-environment-for-the-poor-to-succeed-in-their-own-development/>

making, and their poverty situation thereby.⁴ In addition to achieving better lives, one unique contribution of this ‘whole society’ approach is peace at the local level, since people working together transcend their differences and diminish conflicts.⁵

Process of creating an SDG Union

The work of creating an SDG Union begins through transforming the mindset. For the citizens of Bangladesh who live in poverty, meaningful participation in decision-making seems like a far-fetched dream. For government functionaries operating within highly centralised, top-down ministries, the concept of direct accountability to citizens seems like an unrealistic and unnecessary trial. Countries that have actually implemented bottom-up planning and social accountability successfully, have found that the implementation process must begin with a profound shift in the mindset of both functionaries and citizens, from ‘benefactor/beneficiary’ to ‘public servant/active citizen’. To achieve this, the SDG Union Strategy begins with a “Vision, Commitment and Action” workshop and the training of critical mass of approximately 150 grassroots volunteer animators and other volunteers in each union, committed and skilled in facilitating bottom-up development.

Village Development Committees – Building civil society from the bottom-up

Exercising citizen’s voice is a collective process; active citizens from each segment of the society (women, youth, the ultra-poor) are encouraged to form community-based SHGs to make their voices heard, and work together to put forward a concise set of shared priorities. In addition to the body of animators, the SDG Union Strategy trains women leaders, youth leaders, champions of good governance and girls’ rights, and PAR facilitators who create groups among the ultra-poor. The leaders of each of these village groups meet together as a Village Development Committee (VDC) to coordinate their activities.

Transforming gender relations

The SDG principle of “No One Will Be Left Behind” has special meaning in rural Bangladesh, where adolescent girls and women are not often permitted to participate in public life. Trained women leaders from the village therefore, are asked to organise ‘court yard’ meetings where all family members can participate and discuss sensitive issues, such as preventing domestic violence, child marriage,

keeping girls in school, good nutrition and other human rights issues.

Active partnership with local government

UP representatives and functionaries participate in a five-day training that aims to transform their mindset as well as provide them with statutory information, especially on implementing the bottom-up reforms of the 2009 UP Act. Based on this new approach, the UP:

- Works in partnership with the VDCs to mobilise participation in ward shava for generating awareness of service standards under the Citizen Charter, and setting local priorities.
- Makes standing committees functional by including trained THP volunteers and other interested citizens.
- Develops and publishes a 5-year plan based on ward shava inputs.
- Launches mass action campaigns to achieve goals in the plan.
- Reports annually on progress on the plan through open budget meetings.

Sustaining peace and social harmony

The recent rise in violence, often exploiting religious and ethnic differences in hopes of partisan gains, is one of the greatest threats to progress on all the SDGs, and is central to SDG 16. For this reason, the SDG Union Strategy has begun creating peace facilitator groups, and training local peace ambassadors who can analyse the local situation and carry out actions that would promote peace and social harmony. The peace ambassadors and other volunteers lead ‘citizenship and social harmony’ workshops to promote civic rights and responsibilities and peace at the local level. In 10 upazilas, this process has resulted in the three major parties signing a ‘code of conduct’ for peaceful resolution of any differences, and collective action to avoid violent extremism.

Leaving no citizen’s voice behind

The MDGs were designed to get us halfway to a world free from hunger and poverty. The SDGs aspire to finish the job. This makes it necessary to transform promising gender-focused community-led development approaches such as the SDG Union Strategy into full national programmes. Since the process of achieving the SDGs will take many years, Bangladesh should take urgent steps to adopt such

⁴Jachimowicz, J. M., Chafik, S., Munrat, S., Prabhu, J. C. and Weber, E. U. (2017) *Community trust reduces myopic decisions of low-income individuals. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the U.S.A.* 14(21).

⁵Majumdar, B. A. (2014) *Partnership Between the People, Local Bodies and the Government for Achieving MDGs in Bangladesh*. XXIII IPSA World Congress of Political Science. Available from: <http://paperroom.ipsa.org/papers/view/31371>

development approach that requires mobilisation of the poor to all unions by 2020. Bangladesh's broad collection of non-government organisations (NGOs) possess the skilled facilitators and trainers needed. Other countries, such as South Korea, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Kenya and Brazil, have already done this to great effect, and Bangladesh can do the same.

Policy recommendations

To enable unions to fully implement their constitutional responsibilities in key sectors, required to localise the SDGs, the followings are recommended:

- Further devolution of public resources, ensuring UPs manage at least 20 per cent of the public spending in order to finance the prioritised projects laid out in UP 5-year plans. Currently, UPs and urban local government bodies account for only about 3.1 per cent of public spending. Setting up a Local Government Commission, as recommended by Dr. Shawkat Ali Committee in 2007, would be a step in the right direction in this regard.
- Immediate transfer of the functionaries of seven government ministries with budget, as required by the 2009 UP Act (Schedule 3), and provision of resources for additional personnel to work with standing committees.
- As part of the national implementation strategy for SDGs, mapping of the role of the local government institutions, particularly the UPs, by targets.
- Capacity building of the UP representatives, including giving them transformational and statutory training to empower them to be catalytic leaders as well as familiarise them with the relevant laws and rules.
- High-level government mandates for line ministry personnel to embrace the concept of active citizenry, mobilisation of the poor and disadvantaged, ward shava participation, and gender-focused, integrated community-led development to ensure that "no one is left behind."
- Setting up a monitoring system at the UP level as per the recommendation of the 2030 Agenda to monitor the implementation of SDGs at all levels.
- Introducing a rotational system of reserved seats for women in local government bodies, including the UPs, as in Indian Panchayat, to replace the existing system.
- Introducing the indirect, parliamentary system of election without party affiliation for local government bodies.

About the Event

The Hunger Project and Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh jointly organised a local-level dialogue on এসডিজি অর্জনে স্থানীয় উদ্যোগ: ভূমূলের কণ্ঠস্বর (Community Intervention for SDG Delivery: Listening to the Grassroots Voices) on 20 May 2017, at the CSS Ava Centre in Khulna. *Mr Md. Moniruzzaman Moni*, Hon'ble Mayor, Khulna City Corporation and *Mr Md. Abdus Samad*, Divisional Commissioner, Khulna attended the event as Special Guests. *Dr Badiul Alam Majumdar*, Country Director of The Hunger Project-Bangladesh made the keynote presentation. From Platform's part, *Dr Mushtaque Raza Chowdhury*, Vice-Chairperson, BRAC and Core Group Member presented the context of the event and partnership in his introductory remarks. *Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya*, Convenor, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh chaired the dialogue.

Citizen's Platform Briefs

Citizen's Platform Brief 1

টেকসই উন্নয়ন অভীষ্ট অর্জনে সুশাসন ও গণতন্ত্র মূল চাবিকাঠি

Citizen's Platform Brief 2

টেকসই উন্নয়নে বেসরকারি খাতের অংশগ্রহণ জরুরি

Citizen's Platform Brief 3

SDG Priorities for Bangladesh

Citizen's Platform Brief 4

CSOs in SDG Implementation in Bangladesh

Citizen's Platform Brief 5

Aligning SDG 4 and 7th Five Year Plan in Bangladesh: Prospects and Challenges

Citizen's Platform Brief 6

Bridging Climate Action and Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh

Citizen's Platform Brief 7

Quality Education: Is Absence of Accountability and Participation a Villain in the Scene?

About the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

The **Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh** is a civil society initiative, taken at the national front, to contribute to the implementation of globally adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Platform was formally launched in June 2016, at the initiative of a group of individuals; the objective has been to track the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Bangladesh and enhance accountability in its implementation process. The concept of the Platform was inspired by the participatory and multi-stakeholder approach promoted as a vital element for success in the attainment of all the SDGs. The Platform currently includes 63 Partner Organisations working on SDG issues across the country.



www.bdplatform4sdgs.net



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