

# Citizen's Agenda 2023

## Towards a Different Bangladesh



Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh  
এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ



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### Giving Voice to the 'Silent' and Establishing Democratic Accountability

#### The Initiative

Preparation of the Policy Briefs builds on a wide range of activities undertaken over the past two years (2022-2023) by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh. These activities sought to capture the views of the country's left-behind stakeholders at the subnational level as regards Bangladesh's dominant development narrative. Citizen's Platform's engagements in this connection included stakeholder dialogues, town hall meetings, focus group discussions, perception surveys and consultation with the media. Also, a Public Hearing was organised at the national level to create opportunities for the disadvantaged people to voice their concerns and aspirations in the presence of high-level policymakers and opinion builders.

It emerged from this exercise that a significantly large number of citizens and certain communities in Bangladesh have continued to remain vulnerable to various risks, which relegated them to the "left behind" situation in the revealed process of economic development. However, the *Leave No One Behind* spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) requires that all citizens, without exception, are ensured an equitable share in the country's development outcomes. Consequently, appropriate actions are needed to address these overarching national concerns to advance the interests of the country's vulnerable citizens and communities.

Accordingly, through country-wide interactions with spokespersons of key stakeholder groups, Citizen's Platform identified 11 themes requiring urgent attention for immediate action. As a follow up, now a series of Policy Briefs has been prepared with a set of concrete recommendations in each of the identified areas, underpinned by the specific context and contestations concerning the articulated theme. In each of these cases, the concerns and interests of the vulnerable groups have informed the suggestions for reforms and policy uptakes.

Each of the Policy Briefs in the series has been prepared by a dedicated team of experts of high national and international repute. Each Policy Brief Team had an eminent personality as the Chair to lead the process, with a recognised professional as the Penholder Expert to prepare and finalise the successive drafts with input from the team members. Each team got together several times, reviewed the notes of the sub-national discussions and the FGDs, and consulted relevant resource materials. A 22-member Advisory Committee, which included eminent professionals and leading personalities, provided guidance to the Policy Brief initiative.

The initiative was led by *Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya* and *Professor Mustafizur Rahman*, Distinguished Fellows at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). CPD, as the Secretariat of the Citizen's Platform, provided all necessary support for the smooth implementation of the initiative.

#### Disclaimer

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## 1 Background and Context

Whilst Bangladesh has achieved commendable success in terms of various socio-economic indicators, there are many challenges the country is having to face in moving forward in the twenty-first century. It needs to be noted and appreciated that non-state actors have played a critically important role in the impressive journey that Bangladesh has undertaken over the post-independence period. Civil society groups, non-government organisations, as also the media of the country, have contributed in various ways in this journey: by raising awareness about issues of concern and development interests to the country, helping with poverty alleviation and improvements in health and nutritional status, offering low-cost health and education solutions, and by helping to identify areas and issues that needed priority attention and actions on the part of the policymakers. Bangladesh's development track record bears out that when all key stakeholders work jointly in areas of economic development, social empowerment and good governance, and in securing civic rights, both Bangladesh's economy and the citizens stand to gain from this. As may also be recalled, the SDGs, the implementation of which Bangladesh is committed, talk of a whole-of-society *approach*. Thus, the state should provide space to non-state actors, encourage constructive criticism, and promote proactive engagement with civic groups.

However, regrettably, in recent times, there has been a backsliding in view of the above. Concerns, as regards the state of democracy, accountability, political rights, and civil liberties, and shrinking political space for civil society organisations (CSOs) and other civil society actors (e.g., lawyers, academics, journalists, and other professional groups), have been on the rise in recent years. The shrinking political space is making it difficult for different groups and individuals to raise their voices in view of the policies and actions pursued by the government. Voices of dissent have also become equally marginalised.

While these concerns have negative implications for all citizens, these are more adverse and alarming particularly for marginalised groups and the left behind and pushed behind people of the country. In other words, even though the gradual democratic backsliding is affecting various aspects and spheres of public life, in a diverse range of manifestations, it is members of marginalised communities who have to bear disproportionate and adverse consequences. These groups include religious and ethnic minorities in both plain lands and the hills, linguistic minorities, the *Dalit* community, as well as persons with disabilities, among others. Women belonging to these groups are subjected to intersectional discrimination on the grounds of their gender. Members of the Hijra community and transgender persons are particularly vulnerable and discriminated against.

Against this backdrop, the Policy Brief focuses on key areas of concern in view of the above and comes up with a set of concrete recommendations as to how the democratic accountability system can be strengthened so that 'silent' disadvantaged communities can make their voices heard and their issues addressed. A search for actionable initiatives in this backdrop must become part of the mainstream discourse and needs to be attended to with due urgency.

### Giving Voice to the 'Silent' and Establishing Democratic Accountability: A Review of the Current Situation

The Government of Bangladesh has shown a strong commitment to achieving the 2030 agenda for sustainable development,

where a key focus is "to leave no one behind". Successive national planning documents, such as the 7th and 8th Five-Year Plans, talk of aligning government policies with the SDGs. Moreover, the government's Perspective Plan (2021-2041) and the National Governance Assessment Framework (NGAF) also reflect its strong commitment to making the growth process inclusive by addressing the concerns of marginalised groups. Over the years, successive Governments have taken a number of initiatives to address the concerns of marginalised groups. Some of these include the following: setting up the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), responsible for investigating and addressing issues and cases related to human rights violations in the country, across the range of civil and political to economic and social rights; enacting a number of laws to safeguard and secure the interests of different vulnerable and marginalised groups; preparing the draft Anti-Discrimination Bill; establishing various institutions of accountability such as the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and the Right to Information Commission, and introducing digital interfaces for accessing various government services. However, in spite of these initiatives, accountability, transparency and good governance remain largely elusive, and the exercise of civil and political rights continues to be restricted. It is particularly the left-behind people whose interests are undermined because of this state of affairs. To understand the reasons contributing to this emergent scenario, it is important to go deeper into the political evolution that the country has gone through over the past years.

The aforesaid civil, political and social rights draw on, and are embedded in, the Bangladesh constitution framed in 1972 which is widely recognised as a most progressive document. Besides, Bangladesh's commitment to implementing the SDGs and its signing of many international laws, covenants, and conventions obligate the country to ensure that civil, human, economic, and political rights are secured and protected.

However, since its birth, Bangladesh has had a complicated relationship with democracy and democratic principles. Governance and democracy went through a difficult period in the years immediately after independence. A decade and half long military and quasi-military rule ensued following the assassination of the Father of the Nation in 1975. Following this, the country made a transition towards democracy in the early 1990s. Since then, the country had four generally free and fair elections, which were by and large accepted by all [in 1991, June 1996, 2001, and 2008]. These elections led to democratically elected governments being in charge, with the two major political parties alternating in forming the government. Regrettably, successive governments have, by and large, failed to take the needed measures to consolidate democracy in the country. According to many national commentators and international observers, Bangladesh lost its status as an electoral democracy following the elections of 2014. The country has gone through two consecutive controversial elections in 2014 and 2018. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) report, published annually by the Sweden-based V-Dem project, identifies Bangladesh as an "electoral autocracy". A number of other organisations have also come up with the same conclusion. Freedom House considers Bangladesh as a 'partly free' country, and Polity V considers the country as "an autocracy".

The question that begs response in view of the above is the following: how has democratic backsliding affected the country's overall accountability system and to what extent has the weakened accountability system made it difficult for

marginalised populations to realise or even demand their rights? Democratic backsliding has resulted in over-centralisation of power, which has allowed the executive to dominate the other branches of the state. According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) report, Bangladesh's score in the horizontal accountability index has fallen significantly over the years. The indications are that the power of different institutions of good governance, including the parliament, the judiciary, the ACC and the NHRC, to oversee functions of the government by demanding information, questioning officials and punishing violations of law and regulations have experienced a secular decline over the recent past years. Incidents of extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances have given rise to concerns. However, neither the parliament nor the institutions of accountability took any concrete measures to address the emergent situation.

The dominance of the executive has affected marginalised groups in two different ways. First, it has effectively narrowed political and civic space by making it difficult for the left-behind groups to raise their voices in support of their demands and engage effectively with organs of state. Secondly, at the field level, the consolidation of the power of the bureaucracy has led to a situation where service delivery is suffering because of excessive and unfettered discretion and weak democratic accountability. Consequently, disadvantaged citizens are often deprived of the necessary public services to which they are entitled. While the government has instituted a Grievance Redress System (GRS), access has remained limited because of the attendant difficulties.

Another critically important issue associated with executive dominance and democratic backsliding relates to the newly emerging challenges being faced by rights-based organisations. CSOs which are involved with rights issues or promotion of democracy, or simply democratic participation and inclusion are finding it increasingly difficult to function. Concerned government agencies are not only reluctant to listen to them but are putting up various obstacles in their path. According to V-Dem, CSOs working in Bangladesh to promote democracy are now facing moderate levels of repression: "...the government engages in minor legal harassment (detentions, short-term incarceration) to dissuade CSOs from acting or expressing themselves. The government may also restrict the scope of their actions through measures that restrict the association of civil society organisations with each other, bar civil society organisations from taking certain actions, or block international contacts." All these are disquieting.

In the context of Bangladesh, various acts such as the Digital Security Act of 2018, and now its successor, the Cyber Safety Act 2023, the Foreign Donation (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act of 2016, the Circular issued by the NGOAB on November 25, 2021, as regards project approval and fund clearance by NGOs, etc. create significant barriers for rights-based organisations to carry out their work. These are manifested in several ways: First, the government is discouraging CSOs from playing an active role in improving the human rights situation in the country as a consequence their critical voice and views are being ignored. The draft Anti-Discrimination Bill can serve as an example in this backdrop. While various suggestions put forward by the CSOs over the past years did encourage the government to design this Bill, CSO activists have pointed out that lack of consultation in the process of formulating the Bill has eventually resulted in a draft that does not address key concerns as regards discrimination and equity in economy, society and politics.

Secondly, by discouraging rights based CSOs from raising their demands, the government is depriving itself of credible voices, which could have played an important role in empowering citizens to claim rights and support the government in implementing various laws and measures in place to secure citizens' rights. This is creating a situation where proper recourse for victims of rights violations is severely limited.

Thirdly, in the context of Bangladesh, several organisations have emerged from within the marginalised communities that are actively projecting the demands of these disadvantaged groups. However, these organisations need allies and alliances in support of their rights and to ensure proper delivery of services. By repressing or restricting the operations of CSOs which work with marginalised communities and organisations, the government is undermining delivery of public services to these groups and they are not being able to exercise their rights.

The above discussion indicates that the gradual democratic recession experienced in Bangladesh has impacted the left-behind groups of Bangladesh in three different but interconnected domains:

- They are failing to exercise their legal, civil and democratic rights, and their voice remain unheard.
- They are failing to get access to quality public services.

Based on some of the key concerns identified above, the next section offers a number of recommendations to address the attendant concerns and barriers in areas of legal and civil rights, voice, accountability and good governance. The idea is to secure the interests of particularly the left-behind groups in Bangladesh in areas of voice and rights by bringing their concerns to the attention of political parties and policymakers.

## 2. Recommendations

### *Issue 1: Empower Marginalised Populations to Secure their Legal Protection of their Rights*

#### *Recommendation 1: Enact the Anti-Discrimination Act with Modifications.*

As mentioned above, the Anti-Discrimination Act can prove to be a powerful tool in establishing the rights of left and pushed-behind groups. While this Bill is a welcome move on the part of the government and the result of citizens' activism over several years, the draft Bill has several limitations. These need to be appropriately addressed. The proposed recommendations are as follows:

- i. Incorporate provisions which address gender discrimination and its intersections with discrimination based on caste, religion, ethnicity, or occupation.
- ii. Incorporate provisions to criminalise discrimination, subject to meeting fair trial and due process concerns.
- iii. Ensure adequate support and protection for victims of discrimination, namely those who seek redress, including against possible reprisals.
- iv. Clearly define and identify victims of discrimination who are eligible to seek redress under the Act.
- v. Support collaborative engagements on the part of CSOs and NGOs to implement the various measures envisaged under the Act and take wide-ranging initiatives to raise the awareness of duty bearers as well as the public about the Act.

- vi. Establish an independent commission to implement the provisions mentioned in the Act.

A firm commitment on the part of all political parties and the government to implement the various initiatives envisaged under the Act will be necessary. This is more so since, as several studies have pointed out<sup>1</sup>, policies, acts, rules and regulations which are already in place are not being implemented properly. In this connection, mention may be made of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010, The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, The Labour Act and Labour Rules, 2015 (which have addressed certain rights of tea workers), The Acid Victim Treatment, Legal Aid and Rehabilitation Rules, 2008, Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act, 2000 and Electoral Rolls Act, 2009, among others. One could also add the Voter List Rules, 2012 (amended in 2019), which gave the hijra community the right to get the NID and cast their vote in the national elections. Proactive actions must be undertaken for their implementation. These policies need to be revisited and amended if necessary. (A detailed analysis of these laws and regulations is beyond the purview of this Policy Brief. Also, some of the other Policy Briefs have dealt with a number of concerns as regards these laws and relevant provisions and regulations.

*Recommendation 2: Keep the Commitment to Strengthen the Capacity of the National Legal Aid Services Organisation (NLASO) to Deliver Legal Services to Those in Need.*

To this end, the government needs to allocate adequate financial and human resources so that information about the rights of citizens is properly disseminated and appropriate support is provided to low-income people, women and marginalised groups. In this context, the National Legal Aid Services Organisation (NLASO) should focus on developing strategies which would allow it to collaborate with other relevant government agencies, as also with non-state actors with a track record on the issue, to ensure access to justice to disadvantaged groups and provide legal aid through partnerships. The government may also think of supporting and financing NGOs which provide legal aid and services instead of itself directly engaging in legal service delivery, and in particular for paralegal programmes in partnership with CSOs.

*Recommendation 3: Eliminate Administrative and Legal Barriers that are Currently Affecting the Functioning of the Rights-based CSOs.*

To support CSOs in upholding the rights of disadvantaged groups, political parties should commit to creating an enabling environment for these organisations to function effectively and without any hindrance. This can be done in two ways: by repealing and/or amending some of the current Acts that undermine the rights of citizens, such as the Cyber Security Act and the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Contributions) Act, and by incorporating suggestions provided by the CSOs while designing policies for their governance. Secondly,

complicated and often unnecessary administrative burdens and procedural delays that CSOs have to face in undertaking their activities ought to be simplified. The NGO Affairs Bureau, currently under the PMO, must ensure that NGO/CSO projects and programmes are fast-tracked for approval when these meet stipulated requirements and be more transparent and accountable in their functioning.

*Recommendation 4: Ensure Representation of the Marginalised Groups in the Electoral Process.*

In order to empower marginalised groups and to enable them to exercise their rights properly, their participation in the political process is critically important. To this end, political parties should commit to nominating candidates from marginalised groups as their representatives in national and local elections, particularly in areas where ethnic or religious minorities and other disadvantaged groups (e.g., Dalit Community, tea-garden workers) constitute a sizable share of the electorate. Political parties also need to take actions to institutionalise internal democratic practices within their parties. Formation of various party committees should reflect representation of disadvantaged groups. Efforts should be taken to ensure that marginalised groups can exercise their voting rights freely and without any harassment or hindrance, and with accommodations being made as necessary, for example, for people with disabilities to access voting booths and polling centres. The government should ensure that their lives and properties are protected during pre- and post-election periods. The Election Commission will need to play a proactive role in this.

***Issue 2: Ensure that Left and Pushed Behind Groups Can Exercise Their Democratic Rights and Make Their Voices Heard***

*Recommendation 5: Create a Comprehensive Database Covering the Marginalised Groups which would Provide Information as regards their location, economic status and the particular challenges they face.*

Such a database will help monitor the status and well-being of disadvantaged groups. Making the data publicly available will help both the government and the NGOs to design effective interventions. The government should work with NGOs in developing such a comprehensive database and updating it on a regular basis.

*Recommendation 6: Introduce Initiatives which would Politically Empower the Marginalised Groups while Allowing them to Bargain Collectively for their Rights.*

In almost all cases, marginalised population groups in Bangladesh often fail to overcome the collective action problem and, consequently, are deprived of the benefits that come from organising themselves. To address this challenge and to allow them to exercise their collective voice, efforts should be taken not only to raise their awareness about their political and democratic rights and rights as citizens but also to support their efforts to come together and mobilise on different issues. They should be able to voice their demand and collectively bargain for the services they are entitled to. CSOs should undertake initiatives to support disadvantaged groups to develop leadership capacity so that they can claim rights, protest structural impediments and mobilise for change.

<sup>1</sup> Faruque, J. A., & Islam, M. R. (2023). Human Rights in Bangladesh: Success and Challenges. DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.112233; Alam, J., & Mashraf, A. (2023). Fifty Years of Human Rights Enforcement in Legal and Political Systems in Bangladesh: Past Controversies and Future Challenges. *Human rights review*, 24(1), 121-142. Titir, A. (2019). From Recognition to Realising Rights: Legal Protection of Gender Identity in Bangladesh Law. Dhaka: Blast; NGDO, NCDW & BLAST (2015). Current Status of Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh: Legal and Grassroots Perspectives. Dhaka: Blast.

*Recommendation 7: Strengthen Existing Social Accountability Tools and Mechanisms and Ensure their Sustainability.*

In the local government system of Bangladesh, a number of social accountability tools have been introduced over the past years. These include, but are not limited to, Ward Meetings, Open Budget Forums and Social Auditing. At the same time, standing committees have been set up at both the Union and Upazila levels in rural areas as well as in the Pouroshobha and city corporations of urban areas (13 in the case of Union Parishad, and 17 in the case of Upazila Parishad) to support vulnerable groups in exercising their rights. However, these social accountability tools and methods have either remained ineffective or are afflicted by elite-capture. To address this, political parties need to make a strong commitment to encourage and take all necessary steps to ensure the promotion and sustainability of these social accountability tools. One possible way of doing this is to ensure that Annual Performance Agreements (APAs) signed by various ministries and government agencies include the organisation of regular interactions with citizens and feedback sessions from citizens as a requirement of performance assessment.

*Recommendation 8: Ensure that Members of Parliament (MPs), Mayors and Commissioners of Municipalities and City Corporations, UP Chairs and Members and UPZ Chairs and Vice-Chairs Organise Public Hearings on a Regular Basis.*

Public hearings, if participation is ensured, provide a very good opportunity for citizens to directly interact with their elected representatives and hold them accountable for their actions and inactions. To ensure democratic accountability, it is important that elected representatives hold such public hearings at regular intervals. Political parties should commit that they will not only hold such events in collaboration with civil society actors but also allocate resources in support of these activities and put in place a system of response and accountability given this.

**Issue 3: Ensure Access to Quality Public Services**

*Recommendation 9: Ensure that the Performance of the Bureaucracy is assessed not on the Basis of Partisan Preference but Professional Competence.*

To deliver services in an effective and efficient manner, Bangladesh needs a public service that is competent and professional, whose members can perform as in-house policy experts, and who are encouraged to speak truth to power. Such a public service can not be created if the bureaucracy is not allowed to maintain its neutrality and function as a 'neutral arbiter'. The bureaucracy needs to be completely free from politicisation. Merit and competence must be given priority at every step of the career of a civil servant, from recruitment and promotion to subsequent career progression.

*Recommendation 10: Strengthen the Existing Grievance Redress System (GRS).*

While the government has introduced a GRS in a number of organisations, this is not being effectively taken advantage of by citizens, especially by marginalised groups. In this backdrop, the GRS needs to be further strengthened and knowledge about it disseminated widely. Concerned government organisations should regularly measure and report on the level of satisfaction derived by citizens as regards the GRS.

*Recommendation 11: Ensure Accountability of Law Enforcement Agencies.*

With limited exceptions, law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh enjoy virtual impunity with respect to their acts and omissions. This has serious implications for marginalised communities and disadvantaged groups. A system of indicator-based reward and punishment in view of their performance must be put in place to ensure that law enforcing agencies operate with professionalism, integrity and without any bias, in the spirit that they are in service of citizens on behalf of the state. At the same time, it must be ensured that prompt, impartial and effective investigations are held concerning any allegations of rights violations and that appropriate punishment is meted out to members of law enforcement agencies if they are found responsible for any violation of the law or their code of conduct.

*Recommendation 12: To Make the Parliamentary Standing Committees Effective, Ensure that Key Committees are Headed by Members of Opposition Parties.*

All political parties should make a commitment that if they come to power, they will allow the members of opposition parties to head key Parliamentary Standing Committees, including the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), Committee on Estimates, and Standing Committees on the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. At the same time, initiatives should be taken to create a special Parliamentary Committee on the human rights situation in the country. This Committee should hold regular public hearings including with civil society members and disadvantaged groups. The proceedings of the Committee should be made public. The Committee should be headed by a member of the opposition party.

*Recommendation 13: Ensure that the Supreme Court Enjoys Absolute Authority and Independence in Controlling and Supervising Subordinate Courts.*

To ensure that justice is being carried out without any influence exerted by the executive, it is necessary to ensure independence of the judiciary. It is necessary to bring the subordinate courts fully under the control of the Supreme Court. At the same time, efforts should be taken to equip subordinate courts with adequate human resources, infrastructure, logistics and modern technology for efficacious dispensation of justice. Periodic needs- assessment of subordinate courts should be carried out for purposes of proper budgeting and appropriate allocations. Proactive disclosure of court activities must be ensured. Putting on display citizens' charters and setting up of information centres at the court premises will be helpful in this backdrop. To ensure legal protection and access to justice of marginalised communities, holding annual conferences and publication of data regarding cases involving these groups should be considered. If disaggregated case-related data tracking geographic location, gender identity, religious and ethnic identities, etc., is available, this would allow the broader public to know about actual progress being made over time with respect to the exercise of the rights to legal protection of the disadvantaged people.

*Recommendation 14: Ensure that the Institutions of Accountability, such as the ACC, IC, and NHRC, Can Perform*

### *Their Vested Responsibilities While Remaining Free from Executive Control.*

To this end, several steps can be taken. A major concern is that the appointment procedure of the Chairs of various institutions of Accountability continues to remain highly politicised. This not only undermines the independence of these institutions but also allows the executive to use these institutions as opportunities to favour particular people in lieu of future benefits. This is sometimes also used to harass dissenting voices. The appointment procedure must be revised so that these institutions have people appointed on the basis of merit and in a transparent manner. These institutions should be able to work with complete freedom.

In order to make these institutions effective, the following actions can be taken:

- i. The law regulating the NHRC needs to be amended. The existing law contains provisions that essentially limit the independence of the Commission's power to investigate human rights violations, including, for example, by members of the disciplined forces. While the term 'disciplined force' is customarily used to denote the military, technically, the police force is also deemed to fall into this category. Consequently, any allegation of a human rights violation by the police and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) cannot, by law, be investigated independently by the Commission; the case is to be the subject of a government inquiry. The NHRC must be allowed the flexibility to investigate violations of human rights irrespective of the perpetrator. Further, the NHRC is only a recommending entity as per its mandate and does not have any executive authority. This severely limits its power.
- ii. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) can play an important role in making the service delivery system transparent, accountable and efficient. To this end, it is essential that the ACC is given full freedom to investigate any allegations of corruption and to prosecute perpetrators. Allegations of corruption and breach of the code of conduct by public servants and politicians must be dealt with swiftly, and the punishments given must be made public. This will enhance the trust of marginalised communities in government institutions and service delivery systems.
- iii. The Information Commission should ensure that various

ministries, particularly those that enjoy a high level of government-citizen interface, as also corporate entities follow a proactive disclosure policy. This is still not the case. Although some positive changes may be observed in recent times in terms of access to information, organisations should be required to provide publicly available and up-to-date information. RTI could be a very useful tool in this regard. It can be a particularly powerful tool in the service of marginalised groups, helping them exercise their rights as citizens. Notably, RTI has been found to be a very effective tool in a number of South Asian countries. However, to instrumentalise the RTI, the capacities of marginalised communities need to be significantly enhanced so that they are able to file RTI requests and are aware of what to do if the required information is not provided. CSOs can play a facilitating role in this connection.

### **3. Concluding Observations**

This Policy Brief has made an attempt to explain and explore how, over the years, the gradual recession of democracy has made the executive in Bangladesh increasingly dominant and powerful. This has severely weakened the process of democratic accountability in Bangladesh. While the emergent system has negative implications for people from all spheres of life, it is the members of vulnerable and marginalised groups who suffer the most from such a state of affairs. Discrimination against disadvantaged groups and the culture of lack of voice and rights are promoted and perpetuated by the increasingly weakened democratic accountability system. Consequently, the civil rights of marginalised population groups are ignored. These groups lack effective redress when their rights are violated; they lack access to political and other channels to express their views and raise their voice. Their right to access quality public services is denied. In this backdrop, the Policy Brief has outlined a set of concrete recommendations towards empowering the vulnerable populations across the country. The Brief identifies ways to strengthen horizontal accountability so that the state can respond properly to the demands and grievances of disadvantaged groups. The Brief aspires to promote accountability, transparency and good governance in the exercise of power in Bangladesh so that marginalised groups are able to claim their rights as full-fledged citizens of the country.

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Citizen's Agenda 2023  
**Towards a Different Bangladesh**

*Policy Briefs*

**Economic Cluster**

1. Transforming Agriculture for an Inclusive and Diversified Economy
2. Providing Decent Employment for Youth in view of Domestic and Overseas Markets
3. Providing Public Utilities and Services in the Backdrop of Unplanned Urbanisation
4. Ensuring Affordable and Clean Energy for All

**Social Cluster**

5. Triggers to Ensuring Quality Primary Education
6. Reducing Out-Of-Pocket Expenditure to Improve Universal Access to Quality Health Care
7. Promoting Universal Social Protection System and the Need for Targeting Disadvantaged Groups
8. Dealing with the Manifestation of Localised Vulnerabilities of Climate Change

**Governance Cluster**

9. Effective Implementation of Laws and Judicial Process for Eradicating Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination
10. Access and Justice for Ethnic and Religious Minorities
11. Giving Voice to the 'Silent' and Establishing Democratic Accountability

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