



THE POWER OF DIALOGUE

Activities and achievements of District Policy Forums



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System Architecture

BACKGROUND

District Policy Forum (DPF)

To promote a more enabling environment for the effective engagement and participation of citizens and civil society in decision making and oversight, it is important to bring together interested civil society actors and build their capacity so that they can represent citizen interests, act as catalysts, and promote the use of social accountability tools (SATs) like Citizen's Charter (CC), Right to Information (RTI), Grievance Redress System (GRS), and National Integrity Strategy (NIS) effectively.

The DPF is Platforms for Dialogue's (P4D) initiative that is working to strengthen civil society and government accountability mechanisms in Bangladesh using four key social accountability tools. Funded by the European Union in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh's Cabinet Division, P4D has formed 12 DPFs in 12 districts focusing on three crucial issues – quality education, child marriage, and health care in community clinics. DPFs aim to bridge the gap between local government representatives and community leaders for a more collaborative and unified approach towards community development using the key SATs.

The DPFs' objectives are to influence government policy and practice through dialogue, advocate for community-led solutions, promote the effective use of accountability tools, and strengthen civil society organisations' (CSOs) ability to effectively engage in decision making and representation of citizens' interests. The role of DPFs is to promote SATs at the district level, represent citizens' interests, and influence policy development and implementation.

While forming the DPFs, priorities were given to existing P4D partners and MAP members. District-based interested NGOs, prominent civil society actors, and local government representatives were included in the forum to ensure diversity and representation of wider citizen groups.

P4D formed 12 forums with around 20 members in each from Bagerhat, Bandarban, Brahmanbaria, Jamalpur, Kishorgonj, Kushtia, Nilphamari, Natore, Panchagarh, Patuakhali, Munshiganj and Moulvibazar Districts. The districts were selected based on how well partner CSOs had implemented key thematic issues including stopping child marriage, improving community health clinic service, ensuring quality education, and community participation in Union Parishad (UP) planning.

To form the DPFs, the first task was to identify and select potential DPF members, review short-listed members to ensure they met the required criteria, make considerations to ensure diversity and inclusiveness, and provide several workshops for the selected members in each district. These workshops began with an orientation workshop which was then followed by the formal formation of the DPFs in the 12 districts and a week-long foundation training for forum members. Each DPF was then equipped to develop a forum action plan, begin implementation of the action plan with necessary support from P4D project staff, and document their lessons-learned and actions to incorporate into the national thematic forum.

The following collection of stories illustrates each of the DPFs' activities, their experiences during implementation, the lessons learned, and their thoughts on sustaining their work in the future.

BAGERHAT



Kabita Rani from Gotapara walked into a small but well-kept community clinic at Mukkhait to collect another dose of her regular cough medicine as she held the end of her brown cotton saree against her nose, guiltily apologising for not wearing a mask. “I won’t forget it next time, I promise,” she added after answering Mizanur Rahman’s, the Community Healthcare Provider (CHCP), questions.

Kabita Rani’s cough has been bothering her for quite a long time; her legs have been itchy for the last couple of days as well. “Here, take these pills today and tomorrow, and follow the same dosage as before,” said Mizanur in a caring voice. “And what about the itchy legs?” asked Kabita Rani. “Come early next month. I am out of the ointment now, and it would be better if you could go to the town and see a skin doctor.” Kabita was followed by sexagenarian Abdul Jabbar suffering from asthma and went home with a few days’ worth of pills. Several more patients were waiting in line to see the ‘medic’, as the locals fondly call him.



Bagerhat DPF has been trying to galvanise the clinic management committee. Thanks to their active engagement, this little clinic has made significant improvements on its quality of service. As part of their active participation, the management committee members have made it a routine to drop in at the community clinic randomly just to see if everything is fine. P4D District Facilitator, Gopi Nath Saha, played a vital role in forming the forum. “Those we chose as DPF members have social status. We chose them because they have an impact on people in the community. Also, they meet the criteria to be a member of the forum. Some of them were recruited because of their previous experience working as a MAP member. We also considered journalists and CSO (Civil Society Organisation) members for the DPF.”

Current Vice President and former Ward Member, Abdul Gaffar, had come around and noticed that the large plastic bowl to weigh new-borns seemed quite uncomfortable without a cushion or mattress on it. “I will raise the matter at the committee meeting to gather some funds for that,” he told Mizanur as he left. The entire community clinic bore clear signs of regular maintenance. Clean washrooms with soap and running water were a welcome sight.

The District Policy Forum’s efforts to explain that the community clinics, part of the government’s public-private partnership (PPP) that belonged to them too, had been successful. Consequently, the locals took an interest in its services as well as the facilities. This community clinic is perhaps one of the very few in Bangladesh



Mukkhait Community Clinic
in Bagerhat District.

equipped with an oxygen cylinder, a special arrangement stewarded by the policy forum members. However, problems remain. Mizanur Rahman says he runs out of many of the commonly used drugs within three weeks of receiving medicine shipments. “Paracetamol, iron tablets, and antacids go out of stock before the third week of each month. As a result, patients go back empty-handed.” Dr Prodip Kumer Bokshi, the Sub-District Health Officer of Bagerhat said, “we have already set up delivery rooms in ten Bagerhat community clinics. We plan to train the personnel to ensure the presence of trained birth attendants.” He said that the joint efforts of government officials and locals have only strengthened after DPF members advocated to improve the community clinics.

“It was like being jarred to alertness from a lazy slumber. We have become far more active because we know the policy forum members will be on the case and enquire about every detail,” said Bikash Kumar Das, the Deputy-Director of Family Planning.

He also thought that the public hearing, dialogue meeting, and District Policy Forum campaigns had been effective in pointing towards the lack of coordination between government and non-government platforms. The meetings were useful in bringing up crucial problems plaguing the community clinics, such as mismanagement, shortage of medicine supplies, and skilled practitioners to provide services. Following DPF intervention, the DC ordered the local engineer in charge to collaborate with the local WASH committee to allocate the necessary number of tube-wells, sanitary latrines for the schools, and community clinics in the area. With advice from the DPF, the management committee is also planning to reach out to the Health Ministry directly about the shortage of monthly medicine supplies.

A veteran journalist and DPF President, Babul Sarker remarked, “Bagerhat DPF brought together 20 individuals in high social standing and with significant goodwill so that we could use that network and galvanise the local administration and local elected representatives as well.” That, he said, had been what the policy forum wanted to achieve in the first place — to act as a catalyst and facilitator. For instance, he pointed out that when at the dialogue meeting people spoke of their problems, the policy forum members were able to get verbal commitments that these issues would be addressed. “In response to a complaint that the community clinics often did not have water, the local Head of the Public Health Engineering Department (DPHE) said he’d immediately order the necessary construction materials so that the next tube-well in the community be placed at the clinic.” Furthermore, he said, the District Policy Forum meetings and discussions had contributed significantly in raising awareness about social accountability tools and also about the people’s role in a public-private partnership initiative. “People came forward to improve the community clinics just the way they do in cases of mosques and temples.”

M.A. Salam Shaikh, the General Secretary of Bagerhat DPF said, “government officials have become more serious in visiting the community clinics, which has in turn made the clinic management committees more active and alert as they are often held accountable for lapses.” The goal of the DPF members is to establish a sustainable chain of service so that even after the project ends, the locals can experience a hassle-free, long lasting, and effective distribution of the system. Furthermore, they are keen to provide adequate medicine to the patients and want to ensure they bring in modern healthcare facilities like x-ray and ultrasound machines to serve the community.

The District Policy Forum in Bagerhat is well on its way to creating an example of how continued collaboration between the government and the private sector can bring about prompt results. The Bagerhat DPF plans to move forward with renewed purpose to ensure steady flow of medication and quality hospital services so that people like Kabita can keep trusting their ‘medic’ for their health concerns well into the future.

BANDARBAN

Aung Chaw Mong, president of Bandarban DPF, received a phone call at around 9 p.m. on 11 December 2021. It was Eli, a staff member from the local NGO Anannya, calling to say that a 16-year-old Khyang girl in Gunguru Agapara, a village in Bandarban Sadar sub-district, was going to be married off despite being underage. The groom, who was also a young teen, lived in the same village. Chaw Mong promptly called the local police station. The officer in-charge led the operation himself to stop the wedding ceremony.

“The next morning, I organised a meeting where the fathers of both the bride and the groom were present. I, along with my DPF members and other civil society members, informed them of the health risks and other dangers of child marriage,” said Mong. They listened to us and pledged to hold off the marriage until their son and daughter reached the legal age.

Chaw Mong, who is also the President of the District Anti-Corruption Committee, said their primary focus is to stop child marriage, which is common among the indigenous people living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). “This is what made us choose this issue to work on,” he said.

Talking about the Child Marriage Prevention Act, DPF secretary Lal Zar Lawm Bawm said that the CHT should have been given special focus in the Child Marriage Prevention Act 2017. “As far as I know, the Act did not consider the fact that there is no marriage registration system in different indigenous communities in the hill tracts,” said the secretary, who is also a religious leader in the Christian community. “However, the District Commissioner (DC) pledged to raise the issue at the DC conference which was going on at that time in Dhaka,” he added.

P4D District Facilitator, Mong Shenuk Marma, played a key role in forming the DPF, which is composed of 20 members including teachers, journalists, lawyers, and local government representatives. The DPF members were selected among the representatives of district-based NGOs, CSOs, P4D partner CSOs, or members from the Multi-Actor Partnership (MAP) groups, and other specific criteria. In keeping with the requirement to have at least one member from the local government, Bandarban DPF has one Councillor, Dipika Rani Tangchangya, as its Vice President. Apart from her, the DPF has five other female members.

DPF President Chaw Mong said two parallel administrative structures posed further challenges. “We work with the government officials, but there is also a King (Chief of the





DPF Vice President Dipika Rani Tangchangya stresses the need for awareness campaigns on child marriage.



Bomang circle) here, who does not care about this issue at all. We're trying to reach the King for his endorsement of the marriage registration system," said the DPF president. Once the DPF was formed and it selected child marriage as their issue, the P4D District Facilitator along with the Regional Coordinator organised an online training for the DPF members. This 15-day training taught them about advocacy strategy and gave them a foundation to utilise online communications tools. Once they were trained, the Bandarban DPF began organising different events and celebrating several special days as part of their advocacy and awareness strategy. They went on to host a number of events to raise awareness about the SATs and how community members could benefit from them.

where citizens asked and quizzed public officials about services. One of the participants, Buddhijyoti Chakma, complained about the quality of service at the District Land Office. Additional Deputy Commissioner (Revenue), Saiful Islam, promised to resolve the staff shortage, which will ultimately improve the quality as well as the speed of service delivery. "In fact, the authority updated the system of the District Land Office record room. Now, it's online and therefore, it's hassle-free for service recipients including those living in hilly, remote areas," said DPF Secretary, Lal Zar Lawm Bawm. Another DPF member, Usain Aung Marma, said, "in the policy dialogue meeting, we tried to make it clear to the DC that the government's efforts to achieve the SDGs would be greatly hampered if child marriage is not contained and the marriage registration is not made obligatory for indigenous people in this district."

The DPF organised a public hearing in September, 2021

Usain said that the DC pledged to take necessary measures to strengthen child marriage prevention committees in the unions. Following the DPF campaign, schools have begun sending out anti-child marriage messages to guardians. Bandarban High School head teacher, Deepti Kona Dey, said, "I shared the messages I received from the DPF events with my students." High school students themselves are becoming aware of the dangers of child marriage and are insistent that this outdated practice change.

"Recently, I heard an interesting incident. A mother of one of my students told me that her daughter threatened to get her arrested if she tried to arrange her marriage before she turned 18," said the teacher.

Deepti's sister Smriti Kona Dey, the Headteacher of Bandarban Girls' High School, also shared the hotline numbers dedicated to prevent child marriage with her students. Social Welfare Deputy Director, Milton Muhuri, said the DPF's efforts would bear fruits soon since it brought teenagers, their guardians, civil society members, and most importantly, local government officials, to a single platform. He said, "we consider child marriage a sort of child abuse. We have a toll-free number – 1098. We use it to prevent this type of abuse."



The DPF's campaigns have showed promise to knock on the right doors and ensure collaboration from families, community social workers, and local government representatives. The DPF members look forward to working more closely with the local community to make Bandarban a district free of child marriage in the near future.

BRAHMANBARIA



The Brahmanbaria DPF chose to focus on the issue of child marriage. After the DPF formation and training programme in April of 2021, the DPF started its work. Among many other campaigns and activities, they held a capacity building training on 12 September 2021, where they learned about the four key social accountability tools being promoted by P4D which are designed to strengthen civil society and government accountability mechanisms.

P4D District Facilitator Khodeja Begum played an important role in forming the DPF, which is comprised of 20 members including teachers, journalists, and local government representatives. In keeping with the requirement to have at least one member from the local government, Brahmanbaria DPF has Councillor Mrs Nilufa Yasmin as one of their members. They also chose Md Arzoo Miah as their President as he has previous experience working on such issues.



Child marriage is especially problematic in Brahmanbaria, which is why the DPF chose to focus on this issue. Mohammad Mahbub Khan, a DPF member, indicated several reasons why child marriage is still so common in the district. He says, “fanaticism and lack of education are the main reasons behind this problem. In our district, we have people who are blindly obsessed with religion.” The ongoing pandemic also contributed to the shocking increase in child marriages. Many female students were married off during the lockdown. Vikarun Nessa, the Deputy Director (DD) of Women’s Affairs, Brahmanbaria, blames poverty as another reason behind child marriage.

She says, “in many cases, migrants visiting their hometowns offer the guardians of young girls a lot of money in exchange for marriage. Sometimes when the girl’s father is a migrant worker, the mother is worried about her daughter’s safety. They cannot ensure maximum protection as they lack resources. Female children are continuously subjected to sexual harassment on their way to and from school or whenever they go outside. As a result, the family thinks it is best to marry her off.” Moreover, Vikarun Nessa says that no matter how much everyone tries, this problem will not easily dissipate until and unless the issue of poverty is addressed and resolved, at least to some extent.

Vikarun Nessa adds, “while the DPF’s initiatives are quite commendable on this front, it is still at the grassroots level.” She also agrees that among the more notable accomplishments, the registrars under the District Registrar of Marriage Office and all the Kazis (marriage officials) formed an alliance and pledged not to endorse or allow child marriage. They also agreed that if they had any suspicions, they would immediately notify the authorities.



জাতীয় যুব দিবস
১ নভেম্বর ২০২১
আলোচনা সভা

স্বাধীনতা যুদ্ধের ১০০তম বার্ষিকী
স্বাধীনতা, শান্তি, মানবিক গণতন্ত্র
সম্পন্ন বাংলাদেশ জন্ম দিবে, ১৯৭১

আয়োজক: বিভিন্ন পক্ষের নেতৃবৃন্দ



Dialogue event organised by
Brahmanbaria DPF on
National Youth Day 2021



The imams (Muslim religious leaders) from the local mosques also made a similar pledge, since many guardians marry off their daughters with only the blessing of a religious cleric, most often an imam.

All these concerns were raised in the DPF's Dialogue Meeting, which was held on 16 November 2021. People from across the district, including DPF members, students, teachers, chairmen, DD of Women's Affairs, DD of Social Welfare, District Commissioner (DC) and the Additional District Commissioner (ADC) General, District Registrar of Marriage, Kazis, and priests were present in the meeting. After the meeting, the District Registrar and the President of Kazi Association, Mohammad Yahiya, promised not to register any underage marriages.

In the public hearing, held on 28 December of 2021, Mohammad Ayub Khan, a DPF member and also the headmaster of a girl's school, recommended using the vaccine card to validate the birth certificate. It has become evident that many parents make fake birth certificates to show that their daughters are over 18 in order to marry them off. Since 1988, every child has received six vaccines right after birth. He suggested using these vaccine cards to avoid the problem of fake birth certificates.



Halima Murshed Kajol, a social worker and victim of child marriage herself, shared her experience in the public hearing. She was married off when she was only a student in class six. Fortunately, her husband treated her well and supported her. Having successfully set up a business and put four children through school, Halima has recently gone back to school to complete her H.S.C. She has also provided free sewing training to women since 1995. Now, she has a thriving tailoring business with 35 staff. In the DPF meetings, she shared her story to encourage other women to prioritise their education before marriage. Additional issues such as corruption in the passport office and the quality of service at government hospitals were raised and discussed as well.

DPF President, Arzoo Miah, says that he is very hopeful about the DPF's progress. They are working hard to sensitise people about the negative impacts of child marriage, promoting good governance, protesting inconsistencies in public services, and informing people of their rights. They believe child marriage is a major issue that needs to be addressed, and they hope that the project will bring great success if they can shift the focus of child marriage from the policy level to the local level. Arzoo Miah will have meetings with all the Kazis from Brahmanbaria in order to bring them all to the same understanding and stand against child marriage. He says,

“even if P4D does not continue, the forum members and I will keep working to remove this curse from our society. I believe that if the citizens are aware enough, it is possible to significantly reduce the number of child marriages.”

JAMALPUR

When Abul Kalam Azad, a DPF member of Jamalpur, pointed out that the road leading to Chandanpur Kabi Kafiluddin community clinic was dilapidated and that the clinic did not have running water because there was no deep tube well, the sub-district's top health official promised that he would look into it as soon as possible.

This happened at a meeting that the Jamalpur DPF organised as part of its campaign to improve services at local community clinics using social accountability tools. The forum is working to bridge the gap between government officials and local citizens, and DPF members are hosting activities geared towards raising awareness about four social accountability tools. The goal is to use them to influence the District Administrations and encourage action and improvement of local community clinic service.

P4D's District Facilitator, Mr Shafiqzaman, played a vital role in forming the forum. "I tried to choose people with an influential social position to join the DPF because they have an impact on people. Also, they meet the criteria to be a member of the forum." Some of the members were recruited because of their prior experience working as a Multi-Actor-Partnership (MAP) member in a previous phase of the project, and the DPF also recruited journalists and CSO (Civil Society Organisation) members to join the DPF.

"People know about all the community clinic services now, so there is a steady flow of patients at my community clinic," said Nazmul Alam, the Community Healthcare Provider (CHCP) of Kabi Kafiluddin Community Clinic. Masuma Akter, the Head of Family Planning at the clinic said she sees 5-7 women daily, and most of them come to enquire about family planning methods and to get birth control pills or injections.

The policy forum has managed to make people aware that community clinics are in fact an initiative under the public private partnership, which makes the public owners of the clinics too. As soon as they realised that it was no different from the local mosque, temple, or school, they began raising funds for the clinic. Though it is not enough for major repairs, citizens are trying their best to contribute to the clinic. "But even that is a good start," said Abul Kalam Azad, who also pointed to the increased flow of patients as a sign of the DPF's success.

This small clinic, besides having a Citizen's Charter, also has a complaint box where patients can submit their complaints and recommendations. The community group members, who constitute the steering committee of sorts for the community clinic, said they had learnt about social accountability tools such as RTI and GRS through the DPF.





Health officials provide treatment to a patient at Kobi Kofiluddin Community Clinic in Jamalpur.



Septuagenarian Shamsul Haque was suffering from asthma and a stomachache. Living practically next door to the clinic, it was a quick trip back for him with antacids that would last five days. “I come here whenever I feel any discomfort, which is rather often at my age. The official is kind and listens to me before prescribing something. The medicine works every time. So, I’m happy,” he said. Haque said, thanks to the community clinic, they do not have to travel all the way to town anymore.

The district’s top health official, Civil Surgeon Dr Pronoy Kanti Das, said that the community clinics in Jamalpur were playing a vital role in reducing the mortality rate of children under the age of five and pregnant women, hence working towards SDG 3 - Establishing Good Health and Well-being. “Working hand-in-hand with the DPF members was satisfactory,” he said, adding that it was particularly effective to bring down the number of C-section deliveries, which accounted for up to a fourth of the births in the area. “They have raised awareness and motivated people to consider birth-canal delivery through their advocacy and training.”

While C-sections can be necessary considering the safety of both the mother and the child, in many cases they were proven to be unnecessary and posed greater health risks in the long term. That is why pregnant women are encouraged to opt for conventional birth provided their overall condition permits it. “DPF members have motivated pregnant women and their families to opt for natural delivery, if possible,” said the top family planning official of Jamalpur, Mazharul Haque Chowdhury. Apparently, the recent figures show these efforts have started yielding results with just nine cases out of 120 opting for a C-section.

Due to the DPF’s campaign on SATs, local citizens are also more aware of and invested in the services offered at the community clinic. The Civil Surgeon said,

“I had received complaints that a local community clinic was not open. So, I made a surprise visit to the site and fixed the problem. Now, the CHCP does not skip work, and the locals are happy.”

Although the pandemic created obstacles for the policy forum, they are still trying to continue their awareness-raising campaign and other activities. They conducted blended meetings, trainings, and campaigns on SATs where DPF members, government officials, and the stakeholders were present. In the dialogue meeting, service providers and the general public were able to communicate frankly and openly, resulting in fruitful discussions which helped resolve some critical issues that had never been brought up before.

A local government official promised to ensure that the clinics would be more easily accessible in response to a complaint about broken roads needing repair. DPF President Shamima Khan had rightly chosen to focus on community clinics, which has helped the locals during the ongoing pandemic. Khan said she was planning to sit with the health care providers at community clinics and see if it would be possible to raise their pay which has not increased in 10 years. “After all, they are the ones who provide the service, and we must look after their welfare as well to make sure that the clinics run efficiently.”

Jamalpur DPF has had an exciting and results-driven experience working with the community. It wishes to continue bringing positive changes to the lives of everyone in the community by ensuring a collaborative approach to fixing local issues.

KISHOREGANJ



Every year Bangladesh faces numerous natural calamities such as floods, river erosion, water logging, and so on, which largely affect the lives of people living in the low-lying regions of the country. “Being a part of the low-lying region, residents in Kishoreganj tend to disproportionately suffer from social problems as a result of natural calamities. One social problem is the lack of proper education. So, when P4D started working to promote the Social Accountability Tools (SATs) focusing on three social issues, we thought that working on quality education would be best suited for our area,” said Rabindranath Chowdhury, Kishoreganj DPF President.

Kishoreganj DPF was formed on 11 April 2021 and comprises of 20 members including teachers, journalists, School Management Committee (SMC) members, local government representatives, and CSO members. As the forum was formed at the peak of the pandemic, many activities had to be conducted online. Their work started on 19 May 2021, when they had a formation training which was followed by a 15-day foundation training from 27 May 2021.

Part of the DPF’s mandate is to raise awareness of the four SATs. DPF members underwent a training on those tools on 15 September 2021 which was led by the Deputy Director of Local Government (DDLG) in Kishoreganj, Mohammad Habibur Rahman. He says, “people were not very aware of the SATs. Now they know where and why a Citizen’s Charter should be installed, how to file a complaint with the GRS, how to ensure their Right to Information (RTI), and how to practice the Integrity Strategy. I think everyone should know about the tools because these tools ensure good governance as well.”

One of the key concerns and reasons the DPF focused on quality education was the fact that the quality of teaching in schools was not prioritised by teachers who preferred to focus on tutoring students privately. This not only causes inequality in students’ access to education, but it also poses a serious threat to the quality of classroom education. To better understand the impact of this issue, the Kishoreganj DPF made a list of five primary schools located in remote areas of the district and sent them a questionnaire in order to conduct a study on the overall situation of education at local schools.

The schools included Binnagarh Government Primary School, Kallani Inclusive Primary School, Karial Government Primary School, and a few more. In the survey, initiatives taken by the school authorities were questioned focusing on recommendations the authorities gave in their recent visits (if any in the last two months) and if those recommendations had been implemented. Another important aspect they focused on was the increasing number of coaching or private tutoring, as students have become more coaching oriented.





Members of Kishoreganj DPF discuss how the DPF gave people a platform from which they could hold authorities accountable.



The DPF also inquired if the SMC or the school authority took initiatives to alleviate the inequality of quality education in school classrooms.

Mir Ashraf Uddin, one of the DPF members, thinks that the coaching centres are an obstacle to achieving quality education. He says, “we want the SMC to be more active in stopping the coaching centres. We should demotivate the students from going to private tutors as well.” Khojista Begum Jonaky, another DPF member says that along with coaching centres, there are other obstacles as well. “Primary school teachers are not satisfied with their salary. As a result, they are not very attentive to their job. They do not go to schools regularly, and they are more interested in private tutoring. I think they need to undergo regular job training.”

Regarding this, District Primary Education Officer, Subrata Kumar Banik says, “teachers are not always regular, and we try to monitor the schools regularly. If there are any complaints against teachers, we try to solve them as quickly as possible.”

The DPF held a public hearing event on 29 December 2021 for community members to share their concerns about various social problems. Issues like corruption at the Land and Passport Office and old age allowance were discussed with the District Director of Social Welfare. People also raised their concerns about easy access to illicit drugs and shared them with the DD of DNC. Anjoli Rani Das, the Head Teacher of Harua Government Primary School, recommended some strategies to ensure quality education starting with categorising the problems according to each school. She says, “different areas pose different problems. So, we need to consider the specific schools and figure out the specific problems that need to be solved.” The DPF also conducted a small survey before preparing the keynote paper for the RTI Day observation, which was held on 28 September 2021.

“While conducting the survey, we saw that many offices do not have a Citizen’s Charter, or the charter has not been updated. We talked with those offices and later, they installed or updated their Citizen’s Charter,” says M.A. Akbar Khondokar, a DPF member and news editor at Shatabdir Kantha.

Hasina Haider Chameli, the Vice President of Kishoreganj DPF, thinks their advocacy work will grow over time. “Now, people are becoming aware of their rights. They know what services they can access, so it is not easy to fool them anymore.” Linkon, another DPF member, says that their online platform on Facebook is very engaging. People react and comment on their posts related to SATs and quality education.

Because of the pandemic, they had to conduct all their activities via online platforms and had very little scope to do any kind of in-person work. According to the DPF members, six months is a very short time for such a project. They agreed that more time would have allowed them to work with a larger demographic and reach more people at the grassroots level. Md. Ejjaj Hussain Kajol, a DPF member says, “to ensure the correct practice of the tools, we need to be able to hold the administrative officials accountable in a more profound way. We hope, by using the tools, we will be able to ensure the quality of education in our district in the future.”

KUSHTIA

P4D has had a lasting impact on the people of Kushtia. As DPF member, Shopon Ahmed said, “in the first phase, we worked with the Multi Actor Partners (MAPs) and partner Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in the unions and sub-districts. Now, we are working at the district level.” The scale up of activities has not only bolstered locals’ interest and understanding of important policy issues, but it’s begun to make a bigger impression at the community level.

P4D’s Kushtia District Facilitator, Rejbiul Kabir, interviewed a total of 18 MAP representatives and 20 civil society representatives in order to create the forum. “We talked with around 20 people including NGO leaders, cultural activists, journalists, teachers, and entrepreneurs in the municipality to find eight members along with the 12 selected from the MAPs and P4D partner CSOs.” Since its inception in the early part of 2021, the DPF organised several meetings and observed three crucial days to spread awareness among the district’s people, with a special focus on stopping child marriage.

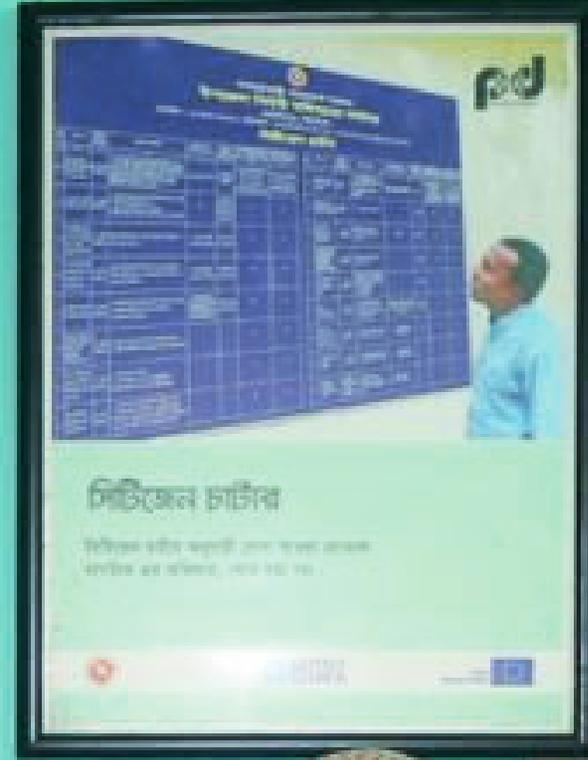
This issue has had a profound impact on young girls in the district. Deputy Director of Women’s Affairs, Noor-e Safura Ferdous said, “the suggestions, feedback, and comments from the DPF meetings helped us to understand the reality of the current situation, and this understanding will allow us to do a better job.” The official now believes that they have improved their accountability and integrity since the DPF spread awareness about the SATs.

“You just saw that one of my staff members came here to talk about the Annual Performance Agreement (APA) report, which is a part of the NIS. Anyone can ask for information from us using the RTI. People are visiting me all the time to get public services that are mentioned in the Citizen’s Charter,” said Noor-e Safura Ferdous.

DPF member, Sohel Rana, said the rate of maternal death in Kushtia is high, which is due in part to the fact that many girls are married off before they reach 18. “As far as I know, our district is 4th in country’s child marriage ranking.” Keeping this crisis in mind, they chose to work on stopping child marriage. With clear evidence that child marriage is a major issue in the district, the DPF worked closely with the District Administration as well as the district offices of youth, social welfare, women’s affairs, and information to ensure public offices across Kushtia understand the repercussions of this issue and work with integrity to solve it.

DPF members also connected with the local religious leaders from Islam, Hinduism, and





Despite not being a DPF member, Noor Banu attends all the DPF events and helps spread their message.



Christianity since religious leaders play an important role in officiating marriages. Zilla School Head Teacher, Md. Eftekhairul Islam, expressed his contentment working with the DPF. “This sort of work must continue,” said Eftekhairul, who is also a member of the District Child Marriage Prevention Committee. “It will make our jobs easier.”

Kushtia Sunup International School and College teacher and DPF member, Ratna Bagchi, acknowledged that it is the DPF that gave her the chance to learn about the SATs and how they can impact the community. “Joining this forum made me aware of these tools, thanks to P4D.” Ratna also shared the stories of two child marriages she prevented- a 7th grader and a 9th grader at her school. “The parents were about to marry those girls off during the pandemic. Learning the news, I visited them and convinced them not to marry the girls off at this early age,” said Ratna proudly.

The DPF has also been proactive about ensuring accountability at public service offices, especially focusing on services that can affect child marriage like birth certificates. DPF member, Sohel Rana, shared that he learned about a new staff member at the Union Council Office – titled udyokta (entrepreneur) – who had been charging 5 times more than the regulated fee to issue birth certificates. Rana visited the Chairman and notified him about the illegal practice in his office. “I also noticed that there was no Citizen’s Charter at the Union Council Office and brought the matter to the Chairman’s attention,” said the youth leader. He said the Chairman took serious note of the matter and said he would personally make sure such irregularities do not continue.

Government officials in Kushtia were also helpful in organising the DPF events. Zilla School teacher and DPF President Mst. Mahbuba Begum said, “the DC himself attended and coordinated all the meetings.” Deputy Director of Local Government Department (DDLG), Mrinal Kanti Dey, asked for the minutes and documents after every meeting. The DPF was especially proactive about keeping records of all communications and reviewing them later so that nothing went ignored, according to ADC (General) Mst. Sharmin Akhter. “They even organised a review meeting to check whether their tasks were properly done or not,” said the official. Deputy Director of Local Government (DDLG) Mrinal Kanti Dey said the DPF’s success in spreading the SATs was laudable as well. “I believe we are already enjoying the dividends without realising that it is because of the DPF’s initiatives.”

In the upcoming project phase, Zilla School Headteacher Eftekhairul said, “the high school students must not be ignored while designing these types of projects. They are the ones who fall victim to child marriage.” The DPF has already started setting up a fund to continue their advocacy and activism even when there will be no funding from any parent organisation. “We already have a plan to conduct awareness programmes with teachers, students, and parents in various educational institutions,” said DPF Secretary Asaduzzaman.

The DPF members are experienced and energised now, and inspired, especially since the pandemic restrictions have been lifted. “The pandemic hampered our work a lot. We hope to work in full swing following the holy month of Ramadan,” said Asaduzzaman with resolve.



MOULVIBAZAR



In Moulvibazar, there are 179 community clinics that provide free basic treatment and medicine. Due to mismanagement, however, many of these clinics were often closed before the Moulvibazar District Policy Forum (DPF) began to address the issue. “This clinic used to be closed most of the time, but now it is open every day, and a significant number of babies are born there every month,” says Ahsan Habib, one of the Moulvibazar DPF members referring to Balikandi Community Clinic. After the intervention of the Moulvibazar DPF at a number of clinics, the quality of those clinics has rapidly improved. As a result, people are receiving better services from those clinics now.

The Moulvibazar DPF is working as a partner of P4D project to raise people’s awareness of community clinic services, galvanise community clinic management committees into action on their own, and educate the public on the key SATs. P4D’s District Facilitator, Aklima Chowdhury, played a key role in forming the DPF, which is comprised of 20 members including teachers, journalists, local government representatives, MAP, and CSO members.



In addition to Moulvibazar DPF’s work on improving community clinic services, the DPF members have organised seminars and workshops (both online and offline) to spread awareness and literacy about SATs. Moulvibazar DPF first started its work on 15 March 2021 with an orientation programme, and on 14 September 2021, they had a capacity-building training on the SATs.

Later, they held a dialogue meeting on 15 November 2021, a public hearing on 24 November 2021, and different day-observation programmes (RTI Day, Anti-Corruption Day, and Youth Day) where they discussed the four key SATs to educate the public on these tools and how they could use them to benefit their community.

Moulvibazar DPF engaged the community clinic management committees and community support groups to take action. People learned about community clinic services through the forum’s workshops. The Civil Surgeon, the district’s top health official, started visiting community clinics. With these initial actions, clinic services improved and some clinics that had previously been closed reopened their doors. Moreover, the Community Health Care Providers (CHCP) began attending the clinics more regularly. As a result, in addition to better treatment, the rate of birth canal deliveries has increased from 32% to 48% in the district.

With these changes, not only did the service providers become more sincere about their work, but also patients began to visit the clinics more regularly after the DPF’s intervention. Now, the people of Moulvibazar frequent the community clinics even for minor health problems, be it a headache or fever. Those with major health issues get referred to hospitals

বালিকান্দি কমিউনিটি ক্লিনিক

পনং চাঁদনীঘাট ইউনিয়ন (সাবেক ওয়ার্ড-১)
ভূমিদাতা: মৃত সৈয়দ আব্দুল কাদির (ময়না মিয়া)
বাস্তবায়নে: স্বাস্থ্য প্রকৌশল অধিদপ্তর।

স্বাস্থ্য সেবা
কমিউনিটি ক্লিনিক

কিভাবে বুঝবেন হারসেলিভা?
সহজভাবে বা বাস্তবিকভাবে বুঝুন হারসেলিভা কীভাবে কাজ করে।



হারসেলিভা কীভাবে কাজ করে?
হারসেলিভা কীভাবে কাজ করে?
হারসেলিভা কীভাবে কাজ করে?

DRAC

Balikandi Community Clinic,
Cadnightat Union, Moulvibazar



by the CHCPs of these clinics.

“DPF Moulvibazar has created a bridge between the service providers and service receivers,” states Md. Abdur Razzaque, Deputy Director of Family Planning (DDFP), Moulvibazar. Generally, people who are at the receiving end are not able to address their problems because they don’t have a platform from which to speak. In the same way, those who are at the providing end cannot explain themselves and point out the limitations they have for the same reason. However, DPF Moulvibazar has offered a platform through which both parties have been able to communicate with each other, address many issues, and find solutions to them. The DPF has engaged citizens, civil society, and local decision-makers which has strengthened civil society’s ability to influence government policy. Through their dialogues and forum meetings, the DPF has also encouraged the practice of accountability and prioritised effective representation of citizens’ interests.

Moving forward, Nazmul Islam Muhib, the President of Moulvibazar DPF, comments,

“this is just the beginning of a great change that is going to take place in Moulvibazar, and we, the Moulvibazar DPF, have initiated this. I believe the community clinics will keep on improving even when our project ends.”

In the same vein, Md. Abdur Razzaque, Deputy Director of Family Planning (DDFP), Moulvibazar, asserts that, “the Moulvibazar DPF’s work is the inception of something big as they have helped us overcome many obstacles related to our community clinics for more valuable outcomes.”



MUNSHIGANJ

As a mother of a young student, Najma Akter didn't know much about her role as a guardian with regard to how her child's school operated. However, after attending the meetings and discussion sessions conducted by the Munshiganj District Policy Forum (DPF), she realised guardians could have a more active role in their kids' education, especially with the help of the SATs like Right to Information (RTI) or the Grievance Redress System (GRS). "I used to feel very intimidated asking about my child's lessons or about things that are going on at school. But now, I know there are several ways to address these concerns," she said.

Md. Aynal Haque Shovon, member of two school committees, said the DPF is the first of its kind in Munshiganj. "Thanks to P4D, this forum informed many people about the SATs, especially RTI and Citizen's Charter." Shovon also said that the two schools where he is a committee member provided the guardians with the headmasters' phone numbers in order to ensure accountability and access to information. "This is something that we had never done before and probably would never have done had it not been for the DPF campaign." The Munshiganj DPF decided to focus its work on quality education. "We chose to work on this issue as the UN announced this as the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4)," said the forum president, Khaleda Khanam.

P4D's District Facilitator Bibi Ayesha played a key role in forming the DPF, which is comprised of 20 members including teachers, journalists, lawyers, and local government representatives. The DPF members were selected from the representatives of district-based NGOs, CSOs, P4D partner CSOs, and members from the MAP groups, among other certain criteria. In keeping with the requirement to have at least one member from the local government, Munshiganj DPF has Municipality Mayor Sohel Rana as its Vice President. Apart from President Khaleda Khanam and Secretary Hamida Khatun, the DPF has four other women among its ranks.

A university student, Wasiur Rahman Brinto said he did not know about SATs before attending a DPF-led event. "The DPF helped us learn about Right to Information, which is a very powerful tool. The meetings and training sessions also spoke about other tools that citizens could use to their benefit." Brinto thinks that the next generation will be a smart one who can address corruption effectively. "The government must include these tools in the national curriculum if it's not already done." Having participated in DPF events, Riazuddin Rayhan, a master's student and founder of a civil society organisation, organised several workshops and training sessions to teach school children how to use different kinds of devices and online tools for learning.

P4D organised a 15-day online training programme for DPF members on advocacy and



Najma Akter, parent of a student, attended dialogues organised by DPF.

A portrait of a woman wearing a light blue hijab and a dark blue shawl. She is seated and looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Nargish Akhter,
Councillor of Munshiganj Pourashava and
DPF member



activism. During this time, DPF members also learned about their roles and responsibilities in ensuring quality education in the district. Based on that knowledge, they designed a six-month action plan beginning with a position paper by Ichhapura Government Model High School Headmaster, Nasir Uddin, which highlighted the challenges in the district's schools. DPF members then visited several schools including Ichhapura Government Model School, Malkhanagar High School, and Shonarong Government Pilot Model School in order to include teachers in their activities.

The district's Secondary Education Officer, Md. Benazir Ahmed, was also present at a DPF meeting. He said, "quality education is a great theme to work on. Most importantly, using the government's own tools for activism is something quite novel and rather constructive."

The DPF's activities included several discussions and meetings to mark special observation days and a monthly forum meeting. However, the one event they are all proud of is the public hearing where the public spoke their minds in front of government officials and brought up their complaints, which was a rare opportunity. The meeting ended with a profound pledge.

The Additional Deputy Commissioner (ADC) who was present assured the DPF that he would be directly involved in ensuring three crucial initiatives — parent-teacher meetings, multimedia classes, and strong and effective school committees to improve education quality. DPF Secretary, Hamida Khatun, said the biggest challenge to ensuring quality education in districts like Munshiganj is that the guardians are not aware of their children's education.

"You won't get the desired result of your advocacy if most of the guardians are not aware of their rights as citizens and their children's rights as pupils. That is something we are trying to change with our campaign, and such initiatives take time to bear fruit," said Hamida Khatun.

Members of the DPF, however, are steadfast in their commitment to keep working to improve the quality of education in their district even after the P4D project ends. As stated in their own words, "quality education is not a goal; rather, it's a process."



NATORE



Natore DPF is working with a wide range of community members to raise awareness of the dangers of child marriage as well as promote the use of Social Accountability Tools to empower citizens.

P4D's District Facilitator Amor D'Costa played a key role in forming the Natore DPF, which is comprised of 20 members including teachers, cultural activists, lawyers, and local government representatives. The DPF members were selected among representatives of district-based NGOs, CSOs, P4D partner CSO members, or members from the Multi-Actor Partnership (MAP) groups. In keeping with the requirement to have at least one member from the local government, Natore DPF recruited Ward Councillor Most. Kamrunnahar to become one of the DPF members. Apart from her, and DPF Vice President, Most. Parvin Akter, there are five other female members.

Natore Additional District Commissioner (ADC) (General), Nadim Sarwar, praised the Natore DPF stating that the forum disseminates information on important issues among people who play key roles in the district's power structure. Shibly Sadik, Secretary of Natore DPF, said, "when the forum was formed, we chose to work on child marriage because Natore has the 2nd highest child marriage rate in the country."

A second-year student at National University, Monwar Hossain, who attended several of Natore DPF's events, reflected on the ADC's remarks saying, "now we know. We can demand our rightful services and lodge complaints if we don't get them." The youth continued with a story: "Recently, I went to the Union Council Office to get my birth certificate, but the person responsible for providing this service tried to charge me more. I demanded that the service provider show me the amount on the Citizen's Charter. After that, he was silent, and I successfully received my birth certificate for the correct fee of only BDT 50."

Natore District Commissioner, Shamim Ahmed, said mobile courts – typically convened by a magistrate at the place of occurrence resulting in summary verdicts and sentences – were active in preventing child marriage while talking about the district administration's effort to curb child marriage. "We're getting enough cooperation from the DPF members. They're motivating us by providing us with valuable information in this regard."

Dighapatia Central Jame Mosque Imam, Md. Abu Kalam, expressed his delight to work with the forum. "No other organisation gave me such an opportunity." The cleric said, "I tried to convince the guardians that their daughters should be properly educated before getting married," and he expressed his contentment in being able to support young women in the district.





গণশুনানি

প্রধান অতিথি
জনাব শামীম আহমেদ
জেলা প্রশাসক ও জেলা ম্যাজিস্ট্রেট, নাটোর।

তারিখ : ২৫ নভেম্বর ২০২১খ্রি., সময় : সকাল ১০:০০ মি:
আয়োজনে : ডিস্ট্রিক্ট পলিসি ফোরাম, নাটোর।
সময় : জেলা প্রশাসকের সম্মেলন কক্ষ ও জুম অনলাইন প্রাটফর্ম

BRITISH COUNCIL

The District Commissioner of Natore, Mr Shamim Ahmed, participated as the Chief Guest in a Public Hearing organised by the Natore DPF.



During Friday sermons, Md Abu Kalam further supports the DPF by raising awareness of key Social Accountability Tools including the Right to Information and the Grievance Redress System from a religious perspective. “I try to make people understand the fact that Islam promotes the free flow of information,” he says and explains that the government values this too.



Nababidhan Girls’ High School teacher, Hafiza Khanam Jesmin, attended 3 DPF events in person and two others virtually. She expressed gratitude that the forum gave her a chance to speak directly with local government officials.

“Prior to attending these events, I had no idea what to do when my students fell victim to child marriage. Thanks to the DPF events, I have learned about different solutions that government officials, law enforcement, and child marriage survivors talked about.” said Hafiza.



After attending the events, Jesmin, along with several of her colleagues, organised counseling sessions, informed her students about the health risks of child marriage, and taught them about the Social Accountability Tools. “You can visit my school and see how informed the girls are now,” said the teacher with a proud smile on her face.

With the end of the P4D project approaching, Natore DPF has formed a fundraiser to raise 200 BDT from each of the DPF members every month so that they can continue to work for the community even without funding from a parent organisation in the future. The DPF members look forward to working more closely with the local community, teachers, students, and their guardians to make the district of Natore free of child marriage in the near future.

NILPHAMARI

Nilphamari has always been afflicted with monga, a near famine situation stemming from the lack of employment in rural areas. Poverty is a constant in this region, and along with that, comes child labour. For many families, the prospect of their children earning 200 taka per day seems more profitable than having them attend school. Moreover, since anyone can start working in the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) after the age of twelve or thirteen, children, especially female children, are joining the sector at an alarming rate. As a result, the quality and volume of education have become vulnerable in Nilphamari. For this reason, Nilphamari DPF decided to focus its work on quality education.

In addition to focusing on quality education, the Nilphamari DPF has been campaigning to raise awareness of the key SATs and how the public can benefit from them. The district policy forum held a number of events including a dialogue meeting and capacity-building event to orient members on the four key SATs. After attending the meeting, Farhana Yesmin, a DPF member and a university teacher, decided that it was time to implement what she learned at her college. Along with the principal, she decided to appoint an Information Officer so that students, guardians, and teachers could have easy access to all kinds of information.

With Masum Sarkar's appointment as the Information Officer, a number of people now come to him to inquire about all kinds of information regarding the college including admission fees, exam fees, and how exactly these sums are spent or decided upon. According to Yesmin, this is a great example of putting the Right to Information into practice. She thinks this little step will yield rich dividends in the long run.

Salma Akter, another DPF member has been working to spread what she learned about the tools and their practical use. She began spreading information on the importance of GRS in education to the principals and teachers of different schools. After that, the head teacher of Kokoi High School in Borogacha, Ganapati Roy, took the initiative to install a complaint box. At first, there were no complaints coming in as the students were a bit scared to raise their voices against the teachers or the school committee.

Then, one day in the assembly, Ganapati Roy renamed the box to 'suggestion box', and since then, there has been a constant flow of suggestions coming in. The box is opened



ককই বড়গাছা পি,সি উচ্চ বিদ্যালয়

স্থাপিত: ১৯৬৮ ইং। নির্মাণ: ২০১৭-১৮ ইং

ককই বড়গাছা, নীলফামারী।

বাস্তবায়নে: শিক্ষা প্রকৌশল অধিদপ্তর।


শেখ রাসেল ডিজিটাল ল্যাব
বিশ্বের সব শিক্ষা কার্যক্রমকে অনলাইনে এ কক্ষ প্রদর্শন করে স্বাধীন শেখর
তথ্য ও যোগাযোগ প্রযুক্তি অধিদপ্তর
তথ্য ও যোগাযোগ প্রযুক্তি বিভাগ



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Kokoi Borgachha PC High School
in Borgachha, Nilphamari



once every two months, and the suggestions are read aloud in the presence of the student forum members. Konika, a member of the student forum, said that the forum constantly encourages students to be active in raising their voices. As a result, problems like lack of proper sanitation, poor facilities, or inadequate lessons were solved promptly.

Golam Mostafa, Nilphamari Model College Principal and DPF President, has also installed a complaint box in his school, but students are still not motivated enough to come forward. However, he remains hopeful about this new initiative. He believes that if he could actually spread knowledge of the SATs among the students, then they would be more aware of their rights and responsibilities and make proper use of the complaint box. He said, “if the school management committee is strengthened, a good number of problems can be solved. And to do so, we need to familiarise the committee members with the SATs as well.”

The purpose of these tools is to ensure accountability throughout the system, which is what should be reinforced by officials at all levels, says Monju Sarkar. Despite being a member of the Nilphamari Kachari Government Primary School management committee, Monju was not sure about her duties before the DPF’s intervention.

Common situations like this are clear examples that such responsibility often requires citizen oversight and checks and balances. Journalist Md. Shish Rahman thinks that the SATs provide that very opportunity. “These tools help people raise their voices whenever they see something wrong. If that happens at schools, the management committee members will, in turn, become more aware of their responsibilities too.”

Md. Azaharul Islam, the ADC (General) of Nilphamari, said, “knowledge is power. The more people know about the social accountability tools, the more conscious they will be about their rights. And if the people are aware, the administration is bound to deliver quality service.” Upazila Education Officer, Md. Enamul Hoque Sarkar, said “the tools are actually making changes. They are slow but there are certainly changes. For instance, teachers are becoming more receptive to suggestions and complaints they receive in the complaint box because they also know about GRS and RTI.”

Akhteruzzaman, a DPF member and managing director of an NGO named CADAM, believes that working with SATs and implementing them to ensure quality education has opened up a new path of activism for citizens and a common platform for the local administration.

“Gradually, people are becoming more conscious and informed. These small initiatives are bound to bring changes. We are hopeful about improving the quality of education in our district. Thanks to the DPF, we now know how to do it,” concluded a confident Akhteruzzaman.

PANCHAGARH



Panchagarh DPF is raising awareness among community members of their right to public health services. Thanks to their efforts, community clinics are now helping more people and improving the quality of their services.

Joynal Abedin always thought that community clinics only treated pregnant women. Then one day, members of the Panchagarh DPF asked him to join their meeting on community health. Since then, his understanding of community clinics has completely changed. He was amazed to learn that a community clinic is a place where everyone can go to address minor ailments. As an imam in the neighbourhood, Abedin began talking about community clinics in his mosque and how they were helping the community. Like Joynal Abedin, there are many in Panchagarh who are still unaware that the 111 community clinics in the district provide free basic treatment and medicine.

Panchagarh DPF working with P4D has decided to raise awareness of community clinic services and galvanise the community clinic management committees into action. So far, the DPF members have organised seminars and workshops (both online

and offline) to spread awareness of Social Accountability Tools (SAT) and how to use them to improve the quality of these community clinics.

To begin, the Panchagarh DPF made people aware that community clinic services are available for all kinds of people regardless of their age, gender, or socio-economic status. They had noticed that only women went to the clinics for treatment. So, the policy forum started inviting local leaders—such as the imam, chairman, headmaster, and so on—to their meetings to encourage local leaders to spread the word and convey how these clinics function to their community base. DPF member Lutfar Rahman said, “men not coming to the community clinics is a big problem. So, we asked the local leaders to help us raise awareness.”

Following their initial efforts, the Panchagarh policy forum encouraged the community clinic management committee and community support group to take action. When people learned about community clinic services through the forum’s workshops and the civil surgeon, who is the top health official in the district, they started visiting community clinics. With this, clinic services began to improve and some clinics that used to remain closed started opening more regularly.





Thematic Workshop

Community Clinic

Date: 21 February

Venue: Health Centre, Dhaka



Altarum Nahar Saki,
Panchagarh DPF Secretary,
performed at the Community Clinic
Thematic Workshop in Dhaka.

One such clinic is the Magura Community Clinic. A health care provider of the Chaklahat Union Community Clinic had been more focused on politics and was not sincere about his responsibility as a medical practitioner. However, the Panchagarh DPF members managed to persuade him to take his job seriously and sincerely provide care for patients in his area.

People returning home without receiving medical assistance because facilities lack the proper personnel is a common problem. This is particularly frustrating for villagers who have to walk back home or wait in uncertainty. The District Policy Forum has sought to remedy this situation by simply convincing the community clinic attendants to use stickers stating when they will be back. The community clinics have also agreed to hang Citizen's Charters for people to read and learn about available services. Thanks to these interventions, community clinics have now become more accessible and functional for the people of Panchagarh.

In addition to their work to improve community clinics, the DPF has worked to raise awareness about the SATs. Aktarunnahar Saki, the Panchagarh DPF General Secretary says, "it is a challenge to teach the general masses about SATs, but we managed to do it." Besides its campaign and regular meetings, the policy forum has celebrated Youth Day, Anti-Corruption Day, and RTI Day as well. Their meetings highlighted the importance and use of GRS, NIS, CC, and RTI at length, and the general public was invited to take part. Saki said, "the Panchagarh DPF provided a platform for people where they could ask questions and hold local officials accountable."

"The public was really delighted to learn that they could actually file formal complaints," says DPF President Alauddin Prodhan. After attending these programmes, government officials were also inspired to improve community clinics. "People are receiving better services from us now because of the DPF's interventions," says Md. Azad Hossain, the Additional Deputy Commissioner of Panchagarh. In addition, the Panchagarh policy forum has successfully educated the public on SATs in collaboration with government officials.

To date, Panchagarh DPF has done a great service for its community by improving local healthcare services through collaborative efforts. DPF members have also expressed their hope that this project is extended to last more than just a year. "This is an unprecedented initiative, which has just started to yield results. We do not want it to end before these good practices become a habit," said DPF President, Alauddin Prodhan.

Altarum Nahar Saki, Secretary, DPF-Panchagarh said, "we want to keep on working with P4D's goals and objectives in mind. I would say, the DPF is going to be a sustainable forum. We will not close the DPF. We, the members, come from different institutional backgrounds. Everyone is representing their respective institutions. When several institutions or organisations are represented, in some way, the DPF starts functioning like a self-sustaining organisation with goals, objectives, and plans of its own. DC, Panchagarh has called the DPF a powerful forum because it has significant influence in the community, and he wants to utilise it in the future."

PATUAKHALI

Patuakhali DPF is focused on promoting quality education by working closely with government officials, school management committees, guardians, and students to identify gaps in local education. Patuakhali District has a large youth population. With over 1,000 schools across the district, quality education was the clear policy issue to focus on for the Patuakhali District Policy Forum (DPF).

Afroza Akbar, one of the Patuakhali DPF founding members and Director of Adorsho Manob Sheba Shongsta, said, “we chose to work on quality education because there are many educational institutions in Patuakhali District; to be precise, 209 high schools and 1,234 primary schools. However, there is a major lack of coordination and communication among the administrators, teachers, students, and even parents. There’s a huge scope to develop the standard of education here. We chose this issue as a challenge to ensure good governance and accountability in local education.”

As the forum was formed at the peak of the pandemic, many activities had to be conducted online. Despite this obstacle, the DPF managed to make an impressive impact early on in its process. Md. Mohiuddin, P4D’s District Facilitator in Patuakhali, said, “our DPF has been working closely with government offices, especially with the District Education Office, to improve the quality of education. They have directly visited 6 secondary schools, 5 primary schools, and 3 madrasahs. To date, the DPF has been able to re-activate the dysfunctional school committees of 20 schools.”

Each DPF member has been active in identifying gaps in the local education system. They used different approaches like group discussions, seminars, and training for community members, teachers, students, and parents all focused on improving the quality of education in Patuakhali. The DPF members also lobbied local government officials to issue letters on various crucial issues and circulate them among local schools to solve problems as efficiently as possible. For example, District Education Officer, Md. Mujibur Rahman, issued a letter to the principals of different schools and colleges on how to properly use computer labs, especially during Covid waves. All of these activities have created momentum to develop Patuakhali’s education sector.

Md. Bashiruddin, Headmaster of Khasherhat High School, said, “the schools re-opened on 12 September 2021 after a long break due to the pandemic. However, schools were again closed on 20 January 2022, fearing the spread of a new variant. The Patuakhali DPF carried out some fantastic activities, but we couldn’t really make the most of those activities as neither the students nor their guardians were coming to school. Nonetheless, the results were still laudable. Our students had never received any training on child protection before.





Members of Patuakhali DPF during a regular meeting

Patuakhali DPF organised a child protection training here in this school along with some others in the area.” The headmaster added, “the number of official visits to schools here from the District Education Office has significantly increased over the course of the DPF’s work because of the promotion of Social Accountability Tools.”

Md Abul Bashar, a School Management Committee (SMC) member of Khasherhat High School, said, “the DPF has organised several rallies and seminars at our school which have been extremely helpful in raising awareness not just among students but all the people in general. They contacted us first in September 2021, and since then, they organised several meetings with us, the teachers, the students, and the guardians. They organised an anti-narcotics rally which was praised by everyone. I feel that the quality of education in our school and in our locality in a broader sense will keep getting better if the DPF can continue its activities for a longer period of time,” he added.

Thanking the P4D Project and DPF, Shila Rani Das, Deputy Director of the Department of Social Services in Patuakhali, said, “people-oriented education has been highly encouraged by P4D, which shows how fruitful public-private partnerships can be. If there is no collaboration between government and non-government organisations, development is nearly impossible.”

Shirin Sultana, Deputy Director of the Department of Women Affairs, said, “we are quite impressed with the DPF’s effort to combine the strength of all stakeholders. I have attended a number of programmes both online and offline. Their sense of enthusiasm and participation help us find gaps and work accordingly to fill the void.” Patuakhali DPF President Md. Aminul Islam Shiraj said, “I think we have done a great service to our community. We are trying our best to meet the challenges faced in the education sector, especially during the pandemic.”

Md. Delwar, an active DPF member, highlighted a significant development due to their activities. “We have ensured separate toilets for male and female students in 30-35% of schools in Patuakhali District. We will ensure 100% of schools as soon as possible.” According to District Education Officer, Md. Mujibur Rahman, the DPF has been able to revitalise the SMCs as well. “The SMCs now hold meetings much more frequently but this project won’t be there forever. Still, we are quite hopeful that with some set rules and new regulations, these meetings will be held regularly and the concerned parties will be held responsible.”

Md. Aminul Islam Sheraj, President of Patuakhali DPF said, “we have created a fund for our DPF to ensure its sustainability. Members are contributing, and we plan to proceed with formal registration of our DPF as a non-profit organisation. Our DPF will continue current efforts to promote quality education, like monitoring monthly meetings of the SMC and PTA and ensuring the proper functioning of both committees, as well as working on the school sanitation system. We will also continue to support bridging local schools with District Education Offices.”



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Activities and achievements of
District Policy Forums

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