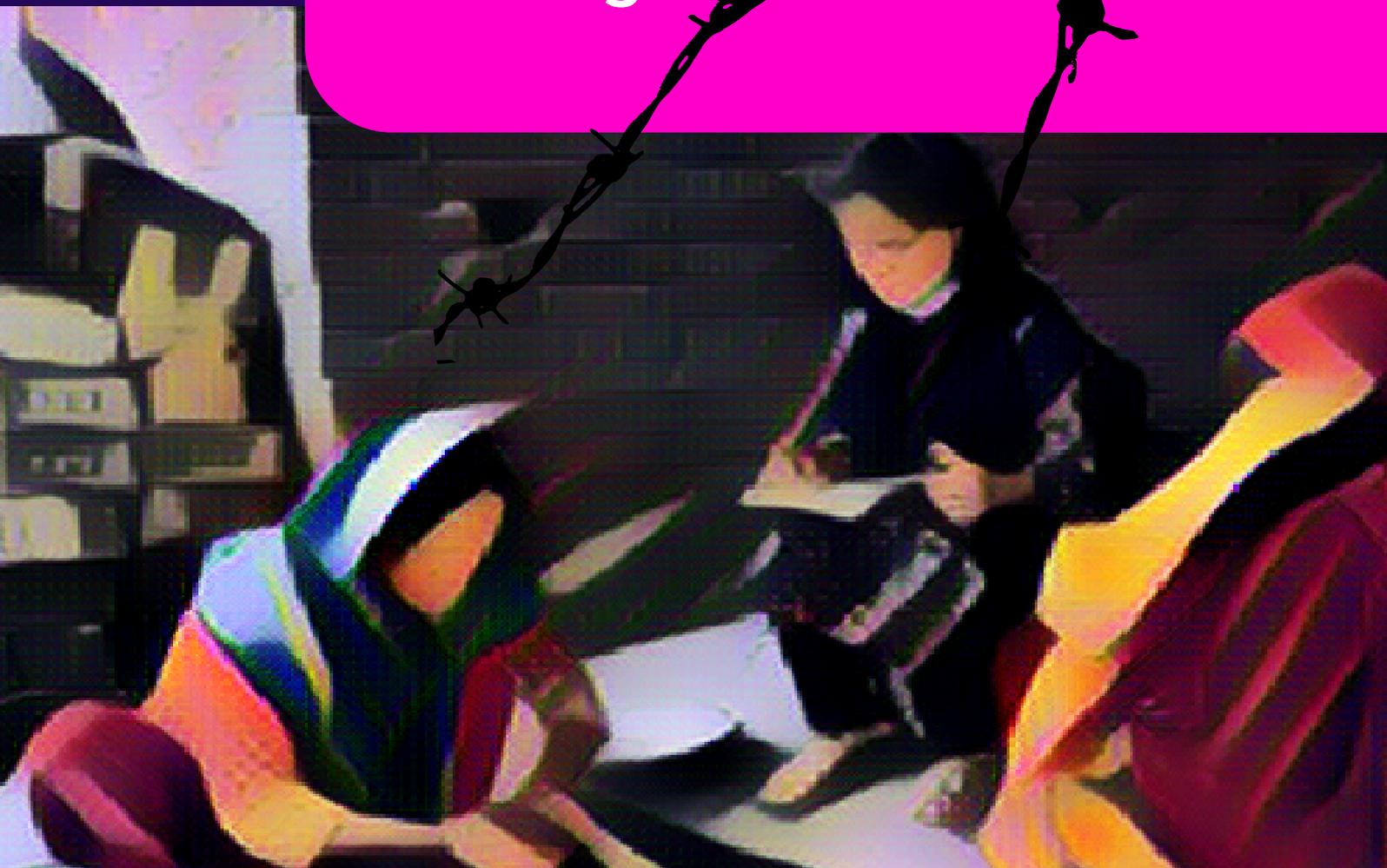




# Breaking Barriers

Stories of Communities  
Striving for Social Justice



# Use of Social Accountability Tools at the Grassroots Level



Mabia is preparing supper for her family while being interviewed.

Mabia, a housewife living in northern Bangladesh in the small village of Tengramara in Haripur Union, recently shared her experience about filing a formal complaint through the Grievance Redress System (GRS) over a land dispute. The area where she lives is picturesque and quaint; one can appreciate the town's simplicity by walking through Mahbia's small neighbourhood. She was talking with one of P4D's end-line surveyors collecting data about her understanding of government services and social accountability tools. While chopping fish for dinner, she said in a shy tone that she had used the GRS to complain about a land dispute with her neighbour. Although she did not get the outcome she wanted, the idea of filing a formal complaint with the support of social accountability tools impressed her. Before learning about it, she didn't know about services. Like Mabia, many people in her community didn't know how to access government services before but are now learning to use them.

Most people learned about these from a local government representative and some village youth said they saw ads about government services online which they shared with elders who were not often using the internet.

Begum, a neighbour living near Mabia, also shared her experience. Her mother-in-law received an old-age allowance from the government thanks to local community leaders who shared information about this social benefit with her. Though she was pleased that her family received government aid, she also complained that often, they did not receive her mother-in-law's monthly allotment. Specifically, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Begum did not receive any aid. However, she learned from media sources that the government issued allowances for poor families in the most remote parts of the country. When asked about the social accountability tools Begum replied that she was glad these tools existed, even if she was sceptical of their impact. Three of five households know about government services and social accountability tools according to P4D online survey collectors. Most people learned about these from a local government representative. Some village youth said they saw ads about government services online which they shared with elders who were not often using the internet. All of the community members who spoke with P4D's surveyors recognised the crucial role of social accountability tools and thought of using them at some point, if and when needed. Proper education about social accountability tools through different mainstream media and local-level advocacy practices could make citizens of all ages even more prepared to understand their rights and use social accountability mechanisms to ensure access to services, justice, and information.

Like Mabia, many women in village households now know about the social accountability tools and how to use them. Most people were not familiar with the formal language used to address the tools, but when the tools were explained to them in simple terms, they were easily able to understand and use them to make a positive impact in their life.



Begum shared her views about the roles of community leaders and how they can improve access to government services.

## Field-Level Implementation of SA Tools: A Brief Reflection from a DPF Member



Rehena Begum knew something was not right at the local organisation working for women's development in her community, so she asked for information about their activity and budget spending. Being an ordinary citizen, the managing supervisor refused her request with the question, "who are you to ask these questions?" But, her suspicions didn't stop her, and after the confrontation, she decided to file an inquiry to check whether there was an anomaly or not.

Parvin Akhter, a local CSO leader and District Policy Forum (DPF) member from Natore, shared an interesting story on how she used the Right to Information Act (RTI) to get information from a local organisation. In her community, there is a cooperative society, Bamandanga Mohila Unnyan Samiti, working for women’s empowerment. Rehana Begum, a community member, asked for a description of activities from the organisation. She specifically asked about the amount of grant funding the organisation received from the government and where they were spending it. However, the organisation’s spokesperson refused to share the information with her. The Union Chairman then approached Parvin Akhter for help as she is an influential civil society leader with experience working in women’s empowerment in her community. Parvin Akhter went to the organisation’s Women Affairs Officer to ask for the information on behalf of Rehana Begum. Refused, Parvin Akhter told the officer that according to the RTI Act, she had the right to receive any public information from the organisation allowed by the law. If she was refused her right, she would formally complain against the officer by appealing through RTI. Only then did the officer agree to provide a solution. The following day, the officer phoned Parvin Akhter and said she would share all the requested information. As Parvin Akhter was saying,

“social accountability tools make our life easier by enabling our rights to receive government services properly. P4D has really helped us learn about the use of SA tools. However, most average citizens, like Rehana Begum, find it difficult to implement these tools.”

She added, “even in this story, you can see how I had to intervene and use my personal influence for the information Rehana was asking that organisation for. But what about the common citizens? To make the SA tools more sustainable, we need to put more effort into educating both citizens and service providers.”



An AI generated sketch of a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) of P4D's endline survey. Parvin Akhter actively participated in the FGD to share her views on the project intervention.

# A Story of Change: How SA Tools Help Local Leaders Resolve Grassroot Corruption



**I asked her to stand up and leave for a one-month suspension",**

Kamrunnahar, a Ward Councillor in Natore Pourashava, said. She was sharing how she used social accountability tools to combat corruption by confronting a public servant who lacked integrity.

Once while visiting the City Corporation Office, a citizen, crying for help, said **“apa, we voted for you so that you can protect our rights. But all we see is corruption and mismanagement. How can a poor person like me pay 1,200 tk for a simple name correction on a birth certificate?”** Kamrunnahar was surprised by this sudden confrontation and asked politely, **“did you check the Citizen’s Charter, apa? Is it the proper fee for a name correction on a birth certificate?”** The woman replied negatively with agony. Kamrunnahar then went to the responsible officer disguised as a common citizen covered with a veil (part of a hijab Bangladeshi women wear). She kindly asked the officer, **“Can you please do a name correction on my birth certificate?”** As expected, the officer claimed the service cost 1,200 tk.



Kamrunnahar knew the fee for the service was only 100 tk and proceeded to unveil herself, revealing that she was the Ward Councillor. Then, she advocated the officer endure a one-month suspension and followed up with higher authorities to ensure the penalty was properly imposed. As Kamrunnahar said,



**a punitive measure is only a temporary solution when we badly need more sustainable corruption prevention. Making people aware of the policy tools and their rights along with educating service providers can be a more sustainable solution to the problem our citizens are facing right now.**

The social accountability tools are helping citizens ensure proper government services. Despite many problems at the grassroots level, knowledge of the tools is reaching citizens across the country helping to ensure good governance and integrity. For long-term results and integrity, the SA tools need to become common knowledge among civil servants, local leaders, and government representatives.



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