

Storybook of

# Enhance Voice for the Inclusion of the Vulnerable and their Empowerment (EVOLVE) Project









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## **(EVOLVE) Project**

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## Foreword

The journey of the EVOLVE project has been, above all, a journey of people. From its very beginning, EVOLVE placed trust in communities, believing that when citizens are equipped with knowledge, skills, and the courage to speak up, they can bring lasting change to their societies.

Over the years, we have seen Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) grow into strong voices for accountability, good governance, and social justice. In places where people once felt unheard, they are now actively engaging with local governments, advocating for transparent practices, and standing together for their rights. These are not small steps. They are profound shifts in how communities view themselves and their future.

What makes EVOLVE unique is its commitment to sustainability. It did not create dependency. Instead, it inspired ownership. Members themselves are now leading the way, forming committees, fostering networks, and planning for the future beyond the project's closure. This spirit of continuity is the true success of EVOLVE. Communities now hold the confidence and the power to carry forward the work long after the project ends.

This storybook brings together voices and experiences that embody this transformation. It highlights how self-motivated individuals, when united, can influence governance, overcome adversity, and build resilience even in disaster-prone and resource-constrained areas. These stories remind us that development is not something done for people. It is something achieved with people.

As we approach the closure of EVOLVE in September 2025, we look back with gratitude and forward with hope. Gratitude to the communities, partners, and colleagues who have walked this journey with us. And hope that the lessons and spirit of EVOLVE will continue to inspire others across Bangladesh and beyond.

On behalf of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation Bangladesh, I extend my heartfelt appreciation to everyone who has contributed to this remarkable initiative. May these stories serve as a lasting testament to the power of collective action and the resilience of people.



**Prashant Kumar Verma**  
Country Director

Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation Bangladesh

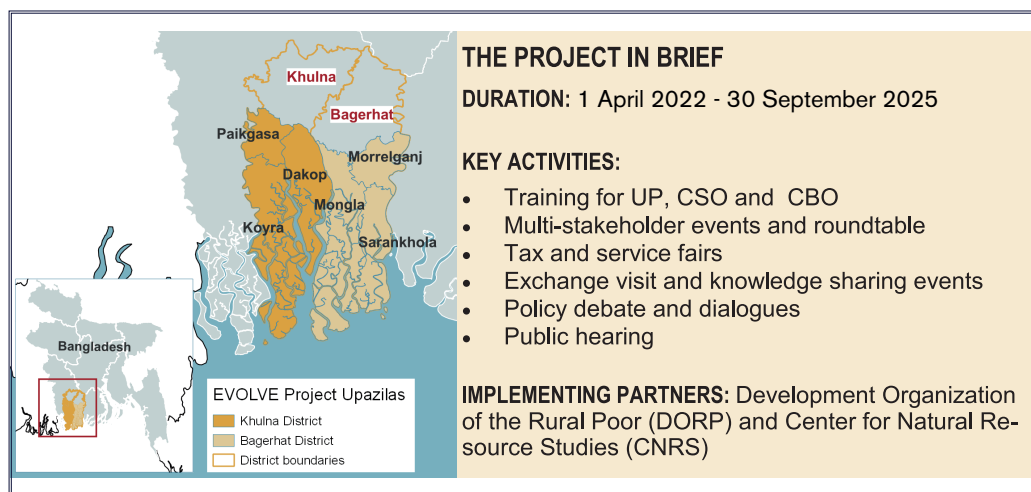
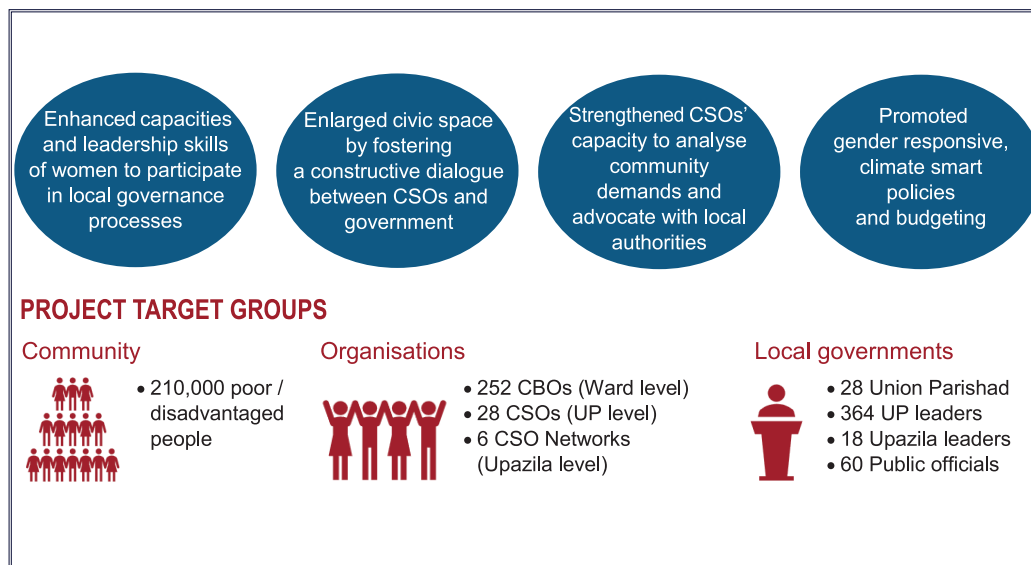


## About EVOLVE Project

The southwest coastal region of Bangladesh is one of the country's most disaster-prone areas. In particular, Bagerhat and Khulna districts are experiencing severe climate related events such as cyclones, storms, tidal floods, and increasing salinity of soil and water sources, that put life and livelihoods of local communities at great risk. Local governments, specifically Union Parishads (UP) have competences to take action and populations are by law entitled to be informed (Right to Information Act 2009) and the right to have their say on how public funds are allocated through the Open budget meetings (The Local Government Act 2009).

But communities are often unaware of the development and implementation of their UP development strategies, plans and budgets and local governments are ill-equipped to foster people's participation.

EVOLVE worked with Civil Society Organizations (CSO), Community Based Organizations (CBO), and the CSO Network, enabling them to bring the voice of women and other disadvantaged groups to local decision-makers. This contributed to the promotion and implementation of climate adaptation policies that responded to the needs of the most vulnerable.







Some young school girls joined the CSO campaign at Koyra, Khulna with placards on hand.

## From Bystanders to Advocates: CSOs and CBOs Driving Local Change

In Khulna's climate-vulnerable coastal belt, where rising salinity and frequent environmental shocks disrupt daily life, a quiet transformation is underway. At the center are members of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), once sidelined but now active drivers of inclusive governance.

Since 2022, through the EVOLVE project, more than 6,000 CBO members and 560 CSO members across 28 Union Parishads have received training on governance, citizen rights, advocacy, gender sensitivity and climate resilient budgeting. Equipped with this knowledge, they evolved from passive bystanders into confident advocates, raising their voices, questioning policies, and demanding transparency from authorities.

Union Parishad budgets once ignored climate and gender priorities. But persistent advocacy by raising demands in ward meetings, open budget meetings, engaging decision-makers, and running awareness campaigns changed that reality. *By 2023, all 28 Union Parishads had adopted transparent, climate-sensitive, and gender-responsive budgets.* Members also pressed for sector-specific allocations, ensuring that resources were not misused but instead directed toward urgent community needs.

Their advocacy did not stop there. They successfully lobbied for ramps for persons with disabilities and breastfeeding corners for mothers, making Union Parishad offices more accessible and inclusive. Their campaigns were both creative



and powerful: from human chains and street performances to bicycle parades and symbolic protests with water pitchers and placards, they used everyday symbols to demand meaningful change and capture public attention.

The reach of their influence extended across sectors. Members submitted petitions to livestock, agriculture, and health offices, and when challenges exceeded Union Parishad authority, they escalated issues to the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) and even Members of Parliament. These efforts secured real improvements in services and ensured that citizen voices reached higher levels of governance.

Since 2025, CSO networks have begun organizing Community Score Card validation meetings in collaboration with government departments. These rare forums bring service providers and service recipients together for honest dialogue, mutual accountability, and collective problem-solving. Each session concludes with concrete commitments to improve public services and monitor follow-up actions, deepening trust between citizens and local institutions.

As CSO member Polash Sardar from Dakop Union shared: “The training empowered us to question corruption. This newfound confidence in advocacy and lobbying is helping us secure our rights and demands.”

Through determination and solidarity, CSO and CBO members have proven the power of grassroots advocacy. Their journey from silence to leadership is reshaping local governance, ensuring inclusion, transparency, and accountability. This is not only a story of local reform but also of communities learning to lead, reclaiming their voice, their rights, and their future.



CSO members rallied to the union parishad with demands boldly written on their placards



Dan Kumari Debi from Bajua union has become an advocate of change

## Not Just Invited but Involved: A New Chapter for Women in Local Governance

“Previously, I was just a woman of a household but now, I am a responsible citizen, and a proud voter who doesn’t shy away from expressing what my community needs,” says Dan Kumari Debi, age 63, CSO member, Bajua Union, Khulna.

In the climate-vulnerable southwest of Bangladesh, governance was once dominated by men, with women left on the sidelines. Union Parishad budget sessions rarely saw women in attendance, and their needs went unheard.

This began to change with the EVOLVE project, implemented since 2022 by Helvetas Bangladesh with EU support. Working across 28 Union Parishads in Khulna and Bagerhat, EVOLVE strengthens inclusive governance, empowers Civil Society and Community Based Organizations, and helps local bodies become more gender-responsive and climate aware.

“A few years ago, only a handful of women were invited to budget meetings – our presence felt ornamental. But look at us today! There are more women than men here, voicing our needs,” affirms Lilabati Mondal, CSO member.

*Once only 10% of participants, women now make up 70% of open budget meetings across project areas. They come informed, confident, and ready to speak. EVOLVE enabled this shift through ward-level trainings, public speaking practice, and household visits by facilitators who built trust and encouraged women to step forward. Women’s participation has brought tangible change. Their advocacy led to gender-responsive budgeting, and breastfeeding corners were established in 22 Union Parishad*



offices. 49 women now serve on standing committees on health, sanitation, environment, women and child welfare, and social services.

One such leader is Dan Kumari Debi, who once hesitated to attend meetings. Through EVOLVE's training, she became an organizer, mobilizing others, submitting petitions, and holding authorities accountable. "Information is power. Before, we lacked information – so we lacked power. Now, we know. Now, we lead," she says.

Her efforts, alongside others, have secured agricultural training, saline-resistant seeds, and access to social services – addressing both climate and livelihood challenges.

Most importantly, institutions now respond to women's leadership. Union Parishads routinely invite them to participate. Budgets reflect diverse community needs. Committees are no longer all male. Spaces once intimidating now echo with women's voices, ideas, and demands.

The EVOLVE project proves that inclusive governance is not only possible but effective. When those most affected by climate change and poverty are part of decision-making, solutions become more relevant, sustainable, and just.

This is not just the story of women, but of communities learning to share power – and in doing so, to EVOLVE.



Once women's participation in open budget meetings was nonexistent. Now, 70% of participants in these meetings are women.



## A Room of Their Own: How Women in Khulna Region Redefined Public Spaces

When 20-year-old Rani arrived at Bajua Union Parishad with her newborn son, she was nervous about managing breastfeeding during the long wait. To her relief, a newly established breastfeeding corner made her feel comfortable. She registered her child, attended the open budget meeting, and later shared: “It feels like the Union Parishad finally belongs to us, too.”

Her story reflects a quiet but powerful transformation across Khulna and Bagerhat, where women once hesitated to step

into public institutions.

For years, Union Parishad offices unintentionally excluded women, especially mothers. “There were no spaces where a woman could sit quietly, let alone breastfeed,” said CSO leader Lili Akter. Many avoided offices altogether, unable to balance childcare with civic participation.

Through the EVOLVE project, women leaders and Civil Society Organization (CSO) members were trained in gender inclusivity, governance, and citizen rights. They recognized



With breastfeeding corners in place, mothers and women can rest with dignity and ease.



this gap and launched an advocacy campaign. Raising the issue in budget meetings and ward discussions, they pushed for women-friendly spaces.

The path was not easy. Male-dominated councils were reluctant, and political unrest in 2024 further disrupted progress. Some offices lacked adequate space. But women persisted, suggesting practical solutions like repurposing unused rooms and reallocating budgets.

Their persistence paid off. *Within a year, 22 of 28 Union Parishads in the EVOLVE project area established breastfeeding corners.* These simple yet vital rooms now allow women to nurse their children, rest, and participate in meetings with dignity.

Each breastfeeding corner stands as a symbol of inclusion and a testament to women's leadership. They show how governance priorities shift when women influence decision-making. "Even if a mother had important paperwork to submit or a meeting to attend, she wouldn't come before," Lili explained. "Now she can – with confidence."

Mothers like Rani and Lili now attend budget meetings without hesitation, knowing their children are cared for nearby. These corners have become safe spaces that encourage greater participation in public life. Despite political hurdles, women's advocacy continues to reshape institutions. Newly appointed administrators are now working to expand the initiative in other unions.

What makes this achievement remarkable is not only the infrastructure but also the shift in mindset. Public offices that once overlooked women's needs are now becoming spaces of inclusion. The breastfeeding corner is more than a room – it is a milestone toward gender-responsive governance and a reminder that when women lead, communities thrive.



A mother finds comfort and care with her 6-month-old at the breastfeeding corner in Raruli Union Parishad, Khulna.



## Taxes that Build Trust: How CSOs Turned Fairs into Festivals of Change

The CSO members under the EVOLVE project began by uncovering the root causes behind persistent social problems. One critical issue was the way budgets were prepared. In the past, the Union Parishad's budget mentioned only a single word—"Climate"—without any detail. Funds meant for climate adaptation were often redirected to road construction, failing to meet the real needs of citizens. Through persistent lobbying, the CSO members demanded a more transparent and structured system. Their efforts

paid off. Union Parishads adopted a detailed and clearer budgeting process, adding subsections that addressed both Climate Sensible Budgeting (CSB) and Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB). For the first time, budgets reflected the aspirations citizens had long been voicing.

But even with better allocations, challenges remained. Union Parishads faced a shortage of funds, as many people were unable or unwilling to pay taxes. Swapna Mondol, a CSO member, explained, “The Union Parishad makes a deficit budget.

[illegible]

Big Budget Boards at Union Parishads make annual budget details visible to the public, promoting transparency and accountability.



Because this is a disaster-prone region, many cannot pay taxes and most do not even know how essential it is. They don't realize that their taxes repair roads, provide saline-resistant seeds, give women training, or distribute free sanitary napkins—all of which build a climate-resilient and gender-sensitive society.”

The CSO members recognized that citizens' responsibilities were just as important as their rights. They proposed hosting Tax and Service Fairs to bridge this gap. Swapna recalled, “We offered to help organize it, to spread the word, and to go door to door to make people understand the importance of giving taxes.”

The members mobilized rallies, made public announcements, and invited government offices, NGOs, and clinics to set up stalls to showcase their services. They showed citizens that tax payments return to them in the form of development and social benefits.

The fairs soon became a success. Tax collection reached record levels, and CSOs encouraged participation by awarding crests to dedicated taxpayers. What began as a campaign grew into a festival—celebrating citizenship and collective responsibility. Mr. Sanjib Kumar Ghosh, the Administrative Officer of Raruli Union Parishad, Khulna, praised the initiative: “During the Tax and Service Fair, our tax collection rises significantly. We also showcase the services we provide, and this builds trust. Without the support of these CSOs, this change in mindset would not have been possible.”

Through their leadership, the CSO members transformed passive citizens into active changemakers, ensuring that local governance became more accountable, climate-sensitive, and inclusive.



*In collaboration with CSOs, Union Parishads are organizing Tax and Service Fairs for citizens.*

## United Beyond the Project: Carrying Forward the Spirit of EVOLVE

As the EVOLVE project approaches its closure in September 2025, its true success lies not in what ends, but in what continues. Across communities in Khulna and Bagerhat, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) nurtured under EVOLVE are proving that empowerment, once achieved, cannot be undone.

“The EVOLVE project did not create any dependency on any NGO,” said Ms. Shibani, a CSO member. “Rather, it empowered us through training, knowledge, and guidance. These lessons will stay with us as long as we live.” Her

words capture the essence of EVOLVE’s vision by building local capacity so that communities themselves become the drivers of change.

This spirit of self-reliance is now guiding CSO members to plan for the future beyond the project’s closure. They have already formed committees to stay united and sustain their initiatives. These structures will ensure that the lessons, bonds, and goodwill forged through EVOLVE remain strong and active long after donor support ends.

For members like Mr. Moniruzzaman from Koyra, Khulna,



CSO members received training to carry forward the goodwill of the EVOLVE project, ensuring its lessons were sustained.



an area where disaster and salinity threaten lives and livelihoods- EVOLVE has instilled resilience. “We live in a disaster-prone area where we struggle with salinity every day. As CSO members, we are self-motivated, thanks to the lessons of EVOLVE. We know, if we stick together, we can change the lives of our society members in a good way,” he shared. His confidence reflects how communities are no longer waiting for outside help but are charting their own path forward.

One of the most remarkable achievements of these groups has been their success in advocacy and lobbying. CSO members regularly submit petitions to government and NGO offices, seeking referral services and resources for their communities. These efforts have brought visible results: people have received training on livestock, agriculture, and sewing machine operations; farmers have been supported with saline-resistant seeds and plants; and safe drinking water was made available through Pond Sand Filters (PSF). The benefits extended far beyond the CSO members themselves, as people across surrounding villages gained from these volunteered initiatives.

A significant achievement of the EVOLVE project has also been the strengthening of trust between citizens and local government institutions. CSO and CBO members have fostered relationships based on mutual respect, transparency, and accountability. They now understand that when people and government work hand in hand, they can overcome even the most difficult challenges.

As the EVOLVE project concludes, its legacy will live on in the determination of citizens who have transformed into advocates, leaders, and change-makers. Their united front ensures that the seeds of empowerment sown by EVOLVE will continue to flourish even long after the project itself becomes history.



Through miking, a CSO member from Khaulia Union, Morrelganj, invites residents to attend the Open Budget Meeting and share their demands



Becoming the Agents of Change



Through participatory training sessions on important elements like gender and climate budgeting, RIT and Union Parishad Act, policy and power analysis, CSO and CBO members have strengthened their leadership and refined their advocacy skills.



Making ward meetings regular



Citizens gather at Ward Meetings to share their demands with ward members for inclusion in the annual budget. Supported by the project, CBO members lead these meetings and mobilize wider community participation. Their efforts have made ward meetings the new normal, giving people a platform to voice their needs for inclusion in the Union Parishad budget.



Being Voice of the People



63-year-old, Dan Kumari, a CSO member from Bajua Union Parishad, voices her demands at an Open Budget Meeting. CSO members like her have become the voice of disadvantaged communities in Khulna region.



Drawing Union Parishad's Attention



Two CSO members carried clay pitchers with their demands written on them to the Union Parishad budget meeting. Through such creative efforts, EVOLVE CSO members draw the administration's attention to community needs.



Comfort and Confidence



A mother visiting the Union Parishad office for her son's vaccination takes a break in the designated breastfeeding corner.



Inclusive and Accessible



Thanks to CSO advocacy efforts, Union Parishads are now more accessible to persons with disabilities. Nine-year-old Obaidullah can now enter with ease through newly built ramps.



Petitioning for community needs



CSO members submit petitions to government and non-government bodies to address community needs. To date, EVOLVE CSO members have submitted over 350 petitions to various offices.





People formed a human chain, holding pitchers in their hands, to draw the administration's attention to the scarcity of drinking water and to demand the establishment of PSFs to resolve it.





Since 2025, CSO networks organized Community Score Card validation meetings with government departments. These forums fostered accountability, problem-solving, and trust between citizens and institutions.





As part of a climate awareness campaign, CSO members of Koyra Sadar Union distributed saline-resistant tree saplings among Union Parishad citizens.



## Enhance Voice for the Inclusion of the Vulnerable and their Empowerment



Thanks to CSO advocacy and petition submissions, men and women have gained access to agricultural training, tree saplings, sewing machines, and livestock rearing support from government offices and NGOs.









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