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Decentralization and Local Governance Network

Socially Inclusive Local Governance- Case Study:

Sharique - Bangladesh

By Tirtha Sikder, Jens Engeli and Sarah Byrne (Intercooperation)
and Tommaso Tabet (SDC)

February 2011

1. Case study: Sharique, Bangladesh

1.1. Background

This case study shares the experiences of Sharique, Local Governance Programme, in supporting socially inclusive local governance and decentralization. Sharique, which means 'partner' in Bangla, aims to empower disadvantaged groups and poor people to claim their rights and entitlements, and to access more responsive public services from local governments in Rajshahi and Sunamganj regions of Bangladesh. The rationale is that with government drawing closer to the people on the one side, and more informed citizens on the other side, new spaces are created for participation, thus influencing decision-making process at local level. The expected result of communities taking their own decisions is a more appropriate provision of local public services and infrastructure, contributing to better living conditions and economic growth. The project works in 130 Union Parishads (local governments) and 21 Upazila Parishads (local government at sub-district-level) in Rajshahi and Sunamganj regions. Currently in its second phase, the project is funded by SDC and implemented by Intercooperation in partnership with 6 local NGOs.

1.2. Context

This section outlines the main issues related to social inclusion in Sharique's working areas (Rajshahi and Sunamganj regions of Bangladesh), with specific reference to local governance and decentralization.

In the context of Rajshahi and Sunamganj, the main social groups that face exclusionary practices are women, ethnic minorities, religious minorities and economically poor people, particularly the so-called extreme poor. Bangladesh in general is still considered as one of the countries with the highest levels of gender discrimination and patriarchal structures imbedded in all levels of society. Women suffer from gender-specific discriminations, such as early marriage practices, gender-based violence, biased inheritance and property laws, restriction of mobility and access to services, participation in public spaces etc. The ethnic minority group living in this region are Adivasis (indigenous people). There are five or six Adivasi communities in Sharique's working area, the biggest communities being the Santal and Oraon. In this region, Adivasis generally do not formally own land (see below), but rather subsist on day labour in the agricultural sector. Recently, some public lands have been leased to Adivasi families by the government. In Sharique's working districts, there are also two religious minorities: Hindus and Christians. The largest minority group in the region are the Hindus (approximately 10% of the population in Rajshahi region). Economically poor and extremely poor people make up a large part of the socially excluded people in the region. Sharique categorises poor and extremely poor people on the basis of several indicators, for example the quality of their house, land ownership, food security, etc.

In Sharique's working areas, social exclusion is strongly reflected in economic terms, in particular in discriminatory practices in access to land, employment and markets. For example, laws about succession and inheritance discriminate against women. A Muslim daughter gets a share of her family's land, but disproportionate relation to her brother(s). Since land remains the main livelihood base for families in Bangladesh, this disproportionate distribution of land between men and women has a lot of implications of disempowerment for women. Adivasis also face exclusion from land ownership: although living in the same region for centuries, many did not formally register their land ownership and consequently are subject to evictions from, and encroachments on, their land. Now, many Adivasis are officially landless. Recent government schemes allocate some public land (*khas* land) to Adivasi families (as individual holdings), but this is only merely a lease of the land with many utilization restrictions, not a transfer of ownership. Lack of land ownership also leads to exclusion from government agricultural and non-agricultural service inputs (seeds, fertilizer, etc), as well as exclusion from access to credit (landless people

being a credit risk according to lenders). In terms of the employment sector, the wage rate for women and Adivasis are much lower than other groups. Since their employment scope is narrower (confined movement, and less diversity in skills), their wage is severely manipulated by the employers.

Social exclusion is also reflected in cultural terms, for example in access to education in indigenous languages and in religious practices. In Rajshahi, most of the Adivasis have their own indigenous language. In particular, elderly people and the less educated among these communities do not speak, or speak very little, Bangla or English. In schools, Adivasi children first have to learn Bangla and then English, a disadvantage compared to their Bangla-speaking peers that leads to low enrolment in education and high dropout rates. Rajshahi and Sunamganj both have Hindu communities; in Sunamganj there are many Hindu majority and Hindu only villages, whereas in Rajshahi the situation is one of co-existence between Hindu and Muslim communities. In places where the two communities co-exist, there is discrimination in terms of religious practices such that Hindu religious events requiring music and public (amplified) prayers have to be stopped if they overlap with a Muslim prayer time or religious event

Particularly in Sunamganj, due to its remote territory, social exclusion is reflected in physical terms such as a lack of communication and transportation infrastructure. Sunamganj district has one of the weakest communication and transportation networks in Bangladesh due to government neglect and a lack of investment. The district is highly vulnerable to different kind of natural hazards such as flash floods, monsoon floods, cold waves etc. The impact of these natural hazards on people's livelihoods is exacerbated by a lack of infrastructure, preparedness and willingness by the official bodies.

In Bangladesh socially excluded groups have formed representative organizations with the agenda of seeking recognition and equal representation, among other demands. For example, there are a number of women's organizations active in advocating for more political entitlements of women. Some of these organizations are a kind of political party advocating for women friendly legislations and policies and there are also some groups who are basically NGOs and working on the same issues. There are also a number of organizations of ethnic minorities active in advocating for more political entitlements, including land rights, and recognition of their language in state affairs and education. A key agenda for these groups is their official recognition as Adivasis/indigenous people and not, as the government and major political parties label them, "special ethnic group". There are also a couple of organizations of religious minorities (Hindus, Buddhists and Christians) that advocate for rights, especially more representation in parliament, in the government, in the bureaucracy and most importantly for better security in the society.

Quotas in recruitment in the civil service and reserved seats in elections are policy measures in favour of the inclusion of excluded groups in governance processes and government institutions in Bangladesh. Quotas for the recruitment of women (10%) and Adivasis (called "Tribal", 5%) are implemented in Bangladesh's civil service recruitment. However, no quotas are in place for religious minorities and though relatively better educated, Hindus are relatively underrepresented in these institutions. Nevertheless, this system can be considered relatively successful as it ensures the presence of women and Adivasis in the public workforce and some representation in the business of the state. The senior management and strategic positions (particularly in the armed forces and diplomatic service) however remain in the hands of dominant groups. Further challenges to the quota system are that it is nevertheless not easy for members of excluded groups to have access to the pre-requisites, in terms of quality of education, that would be necessary to qualify for such jobs. Additionally, there remains some scope for political influence in the process, which works to the detriment of excluded groups. There is also a reservation system for women representatives in the national parliament, wherein 45 seats are reserved for women representatives who are selected by the elected members of parliament. Women's groups are now lobbying that this be changed to a system of direct election to reserved constituencies.

At the local level, a system of direct election of women candidates to a reserved 30% of the seats has been in place since 1997, and has been relatively successful in making a connection between women representatives and their constituency. Indeed, women's

representation is the only social inclusion issue included in the national decentralization strategy and Local Government Act, which does not mandate specific measures for other groups. There are also several challenges to this system, for example women candidates rarely contest the non-reserved seats, especially the chair position, in the election of local government institutions. Besides, those women are elected face challenges in managing their time as they are generally expected by their families and society to continue to perform household responsibilities as before, in tandem with their new official responsibilities. Local government, especially Union Parishads, remains mostly represented by the group of traditional rural elites. The local administration, on the other hand, is pre-dominantly represented by the privileged section of the society, who are necessarily not a traditional elites but who have had access to quality education.

Access to local public services is limited for members of excluded groups, as are the resources available to local governments. For example, even though primary education is free in Bangladesh, and the learning materials are provided, extreme poor children cannot access school education services, because their families engage them in income generating activities. Extreme poor families also cannot access health care services, because of the involved costs (both for treatment and medication). Given the resources available to them, local governments cannot do much on the issue of extreme poverty beyond relatively limited schemes for assisting families, such as providing scholarships, or transportation assistance to pregnant women.

However, local governments can play a role in monitoring the services delivered by other government agents and ensuring that they are delivered in a fair and effective way. There are a variety of different safety net schemes provided by different central government departments and local governments are tasked with selecting genuine beneficiaries. By ensuring selection of a fair list of eligible beneficiaries, local governments can contribute to increasing the access of the excluded groups. In Sharique's working area, local governments also hold coordination meetings with the public services agencies on a bimonthly basis, where their service qualities are monitored and the access of the excluded group is discussed. Furthermore, local governments have 13 standing committees who are also supposed to monitor the performance of public institutions like schools, community clinics etc. These standing committees are composed of elected representatives and appointed members of civil society.

In Sharique's working area, due to project interventions, members of socially excluded groups actively participate in direct consultations and participatory processes held by the local government – in this way at least some of their priority issues are represented. In Sharique's working area all UPs hold public meetings, including excluded groups, to decide on their ward (village-level) plans and UP plan and budget. They also do the same while reviewing the progress of the annual plan and budget expenditures. The structures and methods that are followed in ward and UP planning guides the process to make sure that at least some priority issues of the socially excluded groups are retained in the final UP plan and budget. Furthermore, community based organizations (including the representatives of socially excluded groups) also hold participatory self-assessment exercises on the functionality of the local government. In Bangladesh as a whole, this kind of participation hardly takes place, as it requires a lot of sensitization and capacity building work, which the government is unlikely to undertake.

1.3.   Social inclusion in project practice

This section outlines how Sharique defines, analyses and addresses social inclusion in local governance and decentralization.

The issue of social inclusion is prominently reflected in SDC's country programme in Bangladesh, as well as in the local governance strategic note outlined by the COOF. The strategic objective of SDC's country strategy 2008-2012 is "Improved well-being and economics, social political participation of the poor and poorest and future generations, based on enhanced employment and income and improved access to services, opportunities and decision making processes." To reach this aim, SDC prioritises its cooperation within the two thematic areas of Employment and Income (E&I) and Local Governance (LGov). The following are the outcomes expected of the governance portfolio (of which Sharique is a part)

- Outcome 1: Poor and poorest groups of citizen are empowered to negotiate their interests and take their responsibility in accessing public services;

- Outcome 2: The capacity of local government improves to deliver services in an inclusive, participative, accountable and transparent manner;

- Outcome 3: Policy reform promoted which address pro-poor issues and creates favourable conditions for broad participation of different actors

SDC Bangladesh implements a comprehensive country strategy monitoring system that collects gender and poverty-disaggregated data, while not focusing specifically on the issue of social inclusion more generally. The Swiss Cooperation Office in Bangladesh does not have an overall comprehensive tool to analyze and monitor power relations and exclusion mechanisms, rather these issues have been analysed through specific studies, such as the 2009 study analyzing power and social inclusion in local governance services (for more info, see the references at the end of this document). Further, Projects like SHARIQUE and DASCOH have tools relating to the problematic, in a more "technical" and "thematic" perspective (for example, related to water and sanitation issues or to exclusion/inclusion of poor and poorest in local public life). With respect to country strategy monitoring, the data for respective indicators are mainly collected from the partners' monitoring systems, and are analyzed and compiled in the annual SCO-B report. While the monitoring tools focus on the overall portfolio, and not specifically on social inclusion, the indicators are disaggregated by gender and poverty (whenever possible). The country strategy monitoring tool is described in a concept note available from the Cooperation Office (contact tommaso.tabet@sdc.net).

SDC also implements some specific initiatives in the field of social inclusion, in particular with respect to gender equality. The Cooperation Office in Bangladesh has gender guidelines for the office, comprising a gender partner platform (regular peer learning, info sharing, situational analysis, etc.), GEM check list for Credit Proposals, gender focal point, etc. At the office level, there is a gender policy and a gender workforce policy is under preparation. At a project level, there are a few initiatives specifically focusing on women's empowerment: for example, RUPANTAR (see the SDC Bangladesh website for more info); an upcoming project on Women's Leadership network (horizontal and vertical women's leadership networking for capacity development and agency); and an upcoming study on "Gender, Power and Politics" at Upazila level that shall "advise" on new lines of action.

Social inclusion in local governance and decentralization is a key working area for Sharique, an aim reflected in the project's overall objectives and in specific log frame components. The objectives of Sharique, are, firstly, to strengthen local government capacities to manage public affairs in a more effective, efficient and transparent way, such that they are more responsive and accountable to the community, especially the poor, women and marginal groups. At the same time, the project aims at the empowerment of the poor and poorest with special regard to women and marginalised (or disadvantaged) people, that they become aware of their rights and entitlements, and are able to claim them. The project works on both side of this equation to sensitise and empower rights holders and duty bearers within the given legal framework. Consequently, social inclusion is referred to in different outputs and outcomes that the project is working towards, and is measured through different indicators including, for example,

- "Percentage of funds in the UP budget allocated to projects benefiting the extreme poor".
- "Degree to which the women have been able to have their rational demands considered in ward planning meetings."
- Degree to which the Adivasis have been able to have their rational demands considered in ward planning meetings?
- Degree to which the *extreme poor (bottom 25%)* have been able to have their rational demands considered in ward planning meetings?

Sharique does not work with a formal specific definition of social inclusion or exclusion, but identifies socially excluded groups (referred to as marginalized groups in the project

literature) that it works with in its working area. These include: Adivasis, women, economically poor people and people living in geographically isolated areas. This latter group refers to people living in the Haor area, which is a large low-lying area that becomes flooded during the monsoon. The area can remain flooded for at least 6 months of the year, meaning that people can cultivate only one harvest during the dry season – a harvest that remains at risk due to early flash floods. Fishing is the traditional livelihood means of people living in this area. Due to their geographical isolation and precarious livelihoods, Sharique considers people living in the Haor area to be marginalized.

The project collects a variety of information on the situation of socially inclusive decentralization and local governance. Sharique collects data on social inclusion as part of its regular monitoring. Indicators it monitors include:

- How many UP offices are re-located into Union territory from other urban locations.
- Improvement of participation of female members in UP decision-making processes.
- How many citizens from excluded groups participate in local self-governance assessments.
- How many citizens from excluded groups participated in different UP planning meetings.
- How much the demands of excluded groups were finally considered in ward and UP plans.
- How many representatives of excluded groups are included UP special committees.
- Percentage of UP budget for projects benefiting women or poor people directly.

Project partners also analyse the information given in the UP budgets, including the allocation of the UP budget in favour of women and extremely poor people by a) first indentifying the types of projects/activities which were thought of benefiting either women and/or extreme poor only, then b) identifying the budgets that were for these projects and then c) dividing the total UP budget by the budget for these special projects. Project staff visit UPs and analyse their budgets in particular, but the project does not maintain recorded analyses of the budgets of all 130 partner UPs. Rather than undertaking a typical social audit, Sharique supports six monthly participatory budget review exercises in public.

Sharique implements a range of activities in favour of socially inclusive local governance through integrating social inclusion aspects in all phases of the process. Several of these activities are outlined below:

- *Local self-governance assessment:* It is an exercise with mainly the excluded groups and held at their nearest location which evaluates the functionality of their local government (UP). Participants themselves communicate their assessment results to the Ups, which has started a process of speaking up about governance issues.

- *Ward Planning:* Unlike in the past, now the UP plan starts at the ward level and in public. The project ensures that all the citizens, especially the excluded groups are invited and encouraged to participate. Sharique advises the ward councillor to organize the exercise in such a time and location which is convenient for the excluded group to participate. The project also encourages the CBOs to make sure that citizens of the excluded groups participate in the ward planning meeting and ensures that the UP follows a participatory methodology in planning. Sharique provides coaching to the ward councillors and his/her team on how to explore the voices of voiceless people. The excluded groups participate in separate group exercises so than they can put their opinion independently. The actions of addressing the women, indigenous communities and extreme poor are also considered as one of the criteria in the process selecting the list of priorities.

- *UP central planning:* The same attention is given at the central planning exercise to make sure that the voices of the excluded groups are included, and in particular whether the choices of the excluded groups are considered as priorities in preparing the UP's annual development plan.

- *Participatory budget review meeting:* The same type of exercise is followed to evaluate the progress of UP plan implementation on half yearly basis.

- *Implementation and monitoring of UP plans:* The project makes sure that the UP includes representatives from the UP communities in its different special committees (which have a provision to include/co-opt general citizens). In this process, the representatives of the excluded groups are included in the UP's 13 standing committees that are responsible for overseeing the different sectors (education, health, etc). This process makes sure that the representatives of the excluded groups are also included in different project implementation and supervision committees.

- *Participation of female councillors:* Sharique provides some accompaniment support to the UP to institutionalize a practice of including the voices of female councillors in the decision-making process of UP.

- *Co-financing to UP budget:* Based on the performance of the UP in improving its governance, the project gives some grants to the UP as the part of its annual budget. It should add to the UP's ability to choose and undertake some schemes for addressing the needs of the socially excluded groups.

- *The project provides training on the aspect of gender and diversity:* For example, Sharique developed a 'speak up' module to capacitate women in raising their voices in public hearings and debates, and also introduced participatory gender analyses.

- *Poverty mapping and power analyses:* The project is piloting poverty sensitisation and mapping with UP councillors and civil society members as well as the use of a 'power sensitisation and analysis' module to raise awareness about the multidimensionality of poverty and power and their implications on participation, inclusion, accountability and transparency.

Poor and extreme poor women participating in ward-level planning (Photo: Jens Engeli)

Women inquiring about the details of a posted tax assessment (Photo: Jens Engeli)

Sharique practices a gender inclusive policy in hiring staff and selecting partners. The project always mentions in its job postings that women candidates are encouraged to apply and will get preference, and this is implemented in the process of recruiting staff. As a result, the project's pool of staff has fairly good gender balance: Project Officers (6M, 6F), Finance Officer (1M,1F), Regional Coordinator (2M), Driver (2M, 1F), Finance Manager (1 F), Deputy Project Coordinator (1M), Project Coordinator (1F), Advisor (1M). Out of Sharique's 6 partner NGOs, women head two. Sharique does not take other aspects of identity into account in hiring staff and selecting partners. The project makes sure that the entire staff has adequate sensitivity to the

issue of gender and diversity. Besides, the project also makes sure that its entire front line staff has sufficient skills in facilitating participatory processes.

1.4. Reflection and analysis

This section comprises a reflection and analysis of the principle achievements and outstanding challenges of the case study project, Sharique Local Governance Programme, in addressing social inclusion in local governance and decentralization.

Through the emphasis on social inclusion in local governance and decentralization, Sharique staff and partners can point to several achievements resulting from its focus on social inclusion in the whole planning cycle as well as specific targeting in all citizen based activities (e.g. local self-governance assessment). In this very challenging context, the most significant changes observed by project staff include:

- UP (local government) offices in Sunamganj were re-located into rural areas from urban locations, which now offers better access for the socially excluded groups
- Significant improvement of participation of women members in UP decision-making processes due to Sharique's support to women UP members.
- Many citizens from the excluded groups became active in local governance through their participation in the local self-governance assessment supported by Sharique.
- Significant numbers of citizens from the excluded groups turn out to participate in different planning meeting of UPs every year.
- Demands of excluded groups are now considered and retained in the final ward and UP plan and, on average, 20-30 % of the UP budget is now assigned to projects that benefit women and poor people directly.
- Proactive information discloser by the UP (budget, list of beneficiaries etc) led to higher transparency and decreased patronage and corruption
- Representatives of excluded groups are now included in UP special committees.
- The selection of UP safety net beneficiaries (eligibility for programmes such as "food for work", as well as for pensions and allowances for widows, among others) is considered to be much more fair, with less chance of safety net benefits being distributed purely on a patronage basis

Nevertheless, there remain some significant challenges to implementing socially inclusive local governance and decentralization. One issue is that the strategy of 'positive discrimination' is required to address the issue of social inclusion. But it is not easy for the elected councillors to follow this strategy as they claim that to them all 'voters' are equally important, regardless of their social identities and positions. Another challenge to inclusion is that the representatives of local governments belong mainly to the elite, which plays an important role in decision-making processes, as does the prevalence of patron-client relations in society. However, this can be a two-way street, as patrons need the votes of their clients in order to be elected and these relations can be harnessed to improve the accountability of local government (as shown in the study on "rude accountability" listed in the references). Engaging the private sector and big NGOs (essentially micro-finance institutions) on the issue of socially inclusive local governance has also proven to be a challenge as local governments, Sharique's implementation partners, have little direct influence over these organizations. A further significant challenge to more inclusive local governance is that increased demands for local government services follow the increased participation of socially excluded groups in local governance processes. As local governments, insufficiently provided with human and financial resources, are hardly in a position to respond to these increased demands, a new tension has grown between 'demand and supply'. A more proactive disclosure of information (such as budget information) by the UPs could contribute to reducing this tension.

The project's implementation strategy, with its work directly with local governments, makes tackling the social inclusion issue a challenge – as there is a tension between working both with and somehow against the current power structures. In other words, Sharique has found

it more challenging to address the "supply side" of socially inclusive local governance in its work with local government representatives than the "demand side" with its work with citizens. The issue of social inclusion in connected to the existing power structure of the society, which is difficult to influence through this approach of working with and through the existing structures (of local government and of power, which are mostly overlapping). At the same time, the project believes that its successes in social inclusion nevertheless result out of this specific focus on local governments in all its activities and process facilitation – a certain consistency in partnership. A key to this success has been the project's win-win approach – working on both sides of the equation - in increasing the participation of the socially excluded groups in the affairs of UP and sensitizing local government bodies. At present, the project does not have any strategy to enhance the representation of the socially excluded groups in the structure of UP or to promote their candidacy as UP councillors, as this is a highly political area. In the upcoming UP election Sharique will focus, for the first time, on voter education. The project engages at voter and community level, since engaging with (and promoting) particular candidates (and political parties) – even those from excluded communities – could be perceived as partisan, and therefore politically risky. However, all the other interventions around inclusion do of course contribute to a stronger position and awareness of these excluded groups that should/will result in (i) their casting of votes for their preferred candidate(s), and (ii) some persons will hopefully stand as candidates (especially women – there are a few good examples).

In terms of the capacities of partner organizations for addressing social inclusion, Sharique tries to select partners that already have adequate capacities in this field. In order to assess this, the project checks the following aspects:

- if the partner has a formal gender policy in place.
- if the partners' vision and mission are related to poverty reduction.
- if partner has a long practice of staff recruitment with clear gender preference.
- if partner has a gender segregated monitoring system.
- if partner's staff are well trained in gender inclusive development.
- if the partner's staff are sensitive to women's rights and the rights of poor people.

Sharique also seeks to build on these capacities through the introduction of different (mandatory) training modules for the staff of the project as well as partner organization staff to support them in acquiring capacity and awareness around social inclusion issues.

As outlined above, Sharique has a number of good practices in supporting the effective integration of socially excluded groups in local decision making and priority setting processes, and also has some experience with practices that did not work out as hoped. A good practice example is the ward-level planning exercise implemented with the UP and with the public, with a particular emphasis on the participation of excluded groups. According to project staff, this appears to be most meaningful activity for the excluded citizens to be included. A measure that proved to be challenging was the participation of members of socially excluded groups in different UP committees: this was difficult to manage because participation in these committees requires a lot of time, and time during the day, time which members of socially excluded groups cannot spare as they struggle to earn a living. Additionally, a certain level of education (literacy) is perceived to be necessary to engage actively. Consequently, there is a lot of absenteeism from the representatives of excluded groups in these meetings.

Sharique staff consider that the experiences and good practices generated through the project can be effectively transferred, with some important conditions. These conditions are:

- Segmented structure of society with general tendency to exclusion
- Intervention strategies with approaches that focus on demand and supply side (not to create an imbalance)
- Openness and awareness towards social inclusion (i.e. legal framework, political dialogue)
- Key aspect – existence or possible creation of participatory spaces (this should be legally sound especially when working in local governance), without creating parallel structures
- A genuine willingness for social inclusion linked to concrete actions (service delivery)

- Existence of a certain conditionality to assure take up of demands and needs of excluded groups

1.5. Concluding remarks

Social inclusion figures as one of the key principles in local governance. The experiences of Sharique outlined above show some good practices and successful approaches. However, local governance and decentralisation *per se* are highly challenging endeavours in often controversial contexts and structures. Myriad interests of different groups and power wielders work often rather towards social exclusion than inclusion. Therefore, a pragmatic but focused approach towards social inclusion is necessary that targets both sides of the equation – the local government bodies and the citizens – by working in the existing structures. The creation of participatory spaces and thus direct interaction of local governments with excluded and disadvantaged groups plays a key role for change and thus success.

1.6. References

For more information, please refer to:

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Additional as yet unpublished documents from Sharique may be obtained from Tirtha Sikder at tirtha.sikder@intercooperation-bd.org or Jens Engeli at jens.engeli@intercooperation-bd.org

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