

Rethinking Citizen Engagement in Public Procurement

Towards a Sustainable Community
Centered Strategy

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Introduction

The government of Bangladesh is currently implementing the Public Procurement Reform Project (PPRP) II with financial assistance from the World Bank. BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University is supporting the government with project design, field management and research. One of the main focuses of this project is to engage citizens in the monitoring of public procurement. With this target, BIGD has designed a citizen engagement strategy that includes establishment of a citizen committee complimented by local community mobilization surrounding project sites.

Challenges from the piloting phase

Although members of the Citizens Committee (CC) were reasonably motivated (with certain degree of variations within the districts) and collective action interventions generated positive outcomes, but the CC did not operate in a natural setting—it was heavily nurtured and guided by external actors, in this case BIGD and its NGO partners (details of some experiences from the field are in the Annex). Strength and reputation of the Committee was somewhat based on members' social status but mainly derived from its association with the state actors (to a large extent) and NGO (to a certain extent). Additionally, project fund played an important role mobilizing elite members of the community.

Given the above scenario incentives for collective action have been largely constrained by a number of factors:

- i. There was a weak sense of ownership of the CC members since projects being observed were not proximate to the members and they were also not direct beneficiaries. Caring for public goods is generally a weak motivating factor since people have incentives to free ride
- ii. Transaction costs/opportunity costs (travel, time, political risks) also create disincentives for the members
- ii. Existence of potential conflict of interests (elites and contractors tend to be connected socially and occasionally through kinship)
- iii. This means, current incentive structure of the members can hardly be defined as a self-reinforcing equilibrium

Due to all these issue it can be assumed that sustainability (political, social, and economic) of the project will face uncertainty. There is a clear need for rethinking the elite centered CC strategy.

Rationales for rethinking the strategy

There is a need to design intervention strategy in a way, which can address the incentive problems and financial sustainability, as discussed earlier. This will entail addressing the issues of trust, social capital, and access to information, sense of ownership, free riding, transaction costs for individual citizens and project costs. To overcome the problems we propose a new strategy what we call 'Site Specific Community Mobilization.'

This new strategy was partially implemented in parallel to the ongoing one. This is a minimalist strategy with only two actors: engineers and local citizens, who live adjacent to the site of the projects. Citizen-monitors who live adjacent to the sites tend to have different incentive structure, which enables relatively robust form of collective action. The new intervention strategy can tactically avoid the larger factors such as social capital or elite political influence, which tend to make project design messy or vulnerable to political economy constraints. The new strategy will not incur any project costs since there are no NGOs to facilitate, no offsite citizen groups, which needs to be trained or nurtured. To put it succinctly, there is no 'Project' in this

strategy and, therefore, no question about project sustainability will arise.

Minimal requirements for the strategy to work:

Commitment is required from the state/procurement entities (PE) to provide project relevant information, in a demystified way, to the local community. Such information must include: specification of the job written in simple Bangla; a document explaining the techniques to sort out good construction materials from the sub standard ones; and simple instructions to monitor construction process such as proper ratio of mixing materials and width of rods, placing of rods and so on. Erecting billboard at the site describing the essential information of the project will be a crucial mode of information dissemination to the citizens. Institutionalization of easy flow of communication between the PE and local community is essential throughout the project period. Such information dissemination will help reduce trust related problems, which is deeply embedded in the psyche of the community. Following are the expected benefits to be derived from the proposed strategy:

Reducing the information gap

The most important impact that we expected from the new strategy was reducing the information gap between the project beneficiaries at the grassroots and the implementing agencies. As our experiences showed, the project made the information available at the local level which raised the interest of local people regarding the project. They learned about the specifications and could oversee whether these were met at the construction process.

The new strategy solved the problem of free riding on public good by developing sense of ownership among local people

The project also successfully reduced the incentive problem of local people in relation

to monitoring. By engaging people from the locality in monitoring by equipping them with information and a little technical detail along with briefing them about the need of local ownership, the classic problem of free riding on public good was reduced.

Information at low cost

The new strategy had a major impact on reducing the information cost. The local people and citizen committee members frequently visited the project offices and reported back to the engineer's office regarding the anomalies. It thus solved the monitoring related transaction costs of the state agency significantly. Along with that, the engagement of citizen in monitoring reduced the need for frequent visit from LGED office which also reduced the transaction cost.

Trust

Significant lack of trust among the relevant actors is a major problem which impedes transparent and efficient working of the project. Citizens do not trust contractors and contractors view citizens as opportunity seekers. The citizen also perceives engineers as corrupt and having corrupt nexus with the contractors. By engaging citizen in the monitoring process the new strategy was able to generate trust among all the stakeholders. Contractors when brought under group monitoring were then trusted by the community.

In general contractors have gotten used to the idea of citizen monitoring. Since citizens are monitoring the projects based on the specifications therefore contractors are being compelled to follow the specification of the projects. A robust culture of social accountability is yet to be established but this gradual progress in responsiveness is a major step towards implementation of social accountability mechanisms in public procurement.

Replicability

One major concern of this project was to ensure the replicability in other regions and other projects. The simplicity of the new strategy makes it easier to replicate in other places and other projects. All it needs is the commitment from government officials that they will motivate and engage local people to get involved in the monitoring. The cost is minimal as it doesn't need any facilitation activities or any travel. The model can also be replicable in any other context, any other country or any level. For example, instead of village level roads, if the project includes a district road, all it needs to do is to inform more people who will be living close to that highway. In every few miles, the government officials can do public meetings and can provide them with the necessary information to initiate a local monitoring system. At the same time, it can be done in case of any other types of project. Our project has already been tested in three different types of implementation of procurement process such as road and school constructions, and textbook monitoring and we have found the same citizen engagement model worked in every case.

Design of the new strategy



urban and rural sites and will ensure national representation. Furthermore, the project aims to bring in different public agencies and at different levels of geographical administrative units—Union and Upazila, at least at the initial phases of the intervention. Both rural and urban sites will be included. This will allow for testing the replicability of the model in different institutional and societal settings. An intervention model combining site specific community mobilization and citizen committee formation will be implemented across geographical administrative units and public agencies (LGED, BWDB and RHD). The proposed project will be implemented in 8 divisions of Bangladesh to ensure national representation. Approximately 10 to 15 percent of Upazilas will be covered under the project. The implementation process will be staggered so cumulative learning will allow further refining of the strategy to be tested over the project duration.

Three agencies, LGED, BWDB and RHD, can be chosen as cases for intervention. BIGD will identify three types of projects for intervention – road construction and maintenance, public building construction and maintenance and water infrastructure (embankment and sluice gate). The intervention aims to pilot both simple types of projects (rural roads, schools and embankments) in which site specific community mobilization strategy will be used

The proposed project will comprise of testing in new societal setting. This will involve both

and also relatively complex types of projects (urban roads, public buildings and bridges)

whereby a strategy combining site specific community mobilization and formation of citizen committee can be adopted.

Communication:

A separate communication wing is necessary who will communicate the PPSC meetings and the implementation effectively. There should be greater diversification of communication tools being used for the monitoring of project, such as the use of social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter). Blog and Op-ed

should be produced. Workshops at division level can also be carried out. Workshop on new technology, innovative social media tools can be held at Upazila level. Along with the formal way of complaining, using social media can be another alternative to effective complaint/feedback mechanism. The complainant can send his complain through text message to the local engineer which can also be copied to the project director at Dhaka. Copy should also be sent to the local NGO who will be engaged in facilitation.

Annex: Experiences from the Field

Name and Type of road	Status	Reason for non-completion	Citizen Intervention	Response of Contractors	Results of intervention
Village road: Paglarhaat-Dhapuday Bazaar	Fully completed	N/A	Local community got engaged after the CC visits, where CC members briefed them about the project. Quality of material used by the contractors was not good in the beginning. The materials were changed after local community intervention	Contractors struggled to comply with local community demand at first. However, they were encouraged to comply after discussions with the CC.	Quality of road ensured
School: Fulkucha Government Primary School	Incomplete Only column and pillars completed	Ongoing, will be completed soon	CC briefed them about project quality, specifications. SMC members and local youth proactively monitored. Local youth observed that two different qualities of sand were used in construction. They informed SMC members, who then spoke to the contractor and his associates.	Response was initially negative from the contractor. However, he complied after having discussions with the SMC members	Quality ensured

<p>School: Jagadispur Government Primary School</p>	<p>Completed</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>CC members faced resistance from a district LGED representative and contractor while intervening.</p> <p>Height of the layout of the box cutting was not accurate. No of rod was also not adequate. It was corrected after the CC complained to the engineer and contractor.</p> <p>Local citizens were pro-actively involved in monitoring.</p>	<p>Contractors complied with the CC intervention and positively interacted with the local community regarding the construction work.</p>	<p>Quality ensured</p>
<p>Union to union road: Shaluabhita to GC center road</p>	<p>Completed</p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>CC found that local people were very concerned about the project quality.</p> <p>During the sand filling stage, CC members found that the size of the brick used in the wall construction was not accurate. They informed the contractor. However, due to the unavailability of bigger bricks, the contractor had to use the smaller bricks but in a larger quantity.</p> <p>The local people also noted that the number of rods used in construction was not enough. The contractor corrected this after the local people informed him.</p> <p>At casting stage, local people stopped the construction because they found that the ratio of sand and cement was not accurate.</p> <p>After that incident, the CC appointed a monitor to ensure that the contractor followed the specifications and used the correct proportion of sand and cement.</p>	<p>Contractor was compelled to cooperate because of the actions taken by the local citizens.</p>	<p>Quality of road ensured</p>

Village road: Ajugara bazaar to Doulatpur Moti market	Incomplete, Completed till Sand filling stage	Flood, water logging	The CC could not intervene due to the lack of cooperation from the local engineer. This was perhaps due to the politically powerful contractors. CC found that the height of the road, rolling were inadequate. CC complained to engineers.	Committee failed to make contractor responsive and accountable	Poor quality
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