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PUBLIC PROCUREMENT WATCH

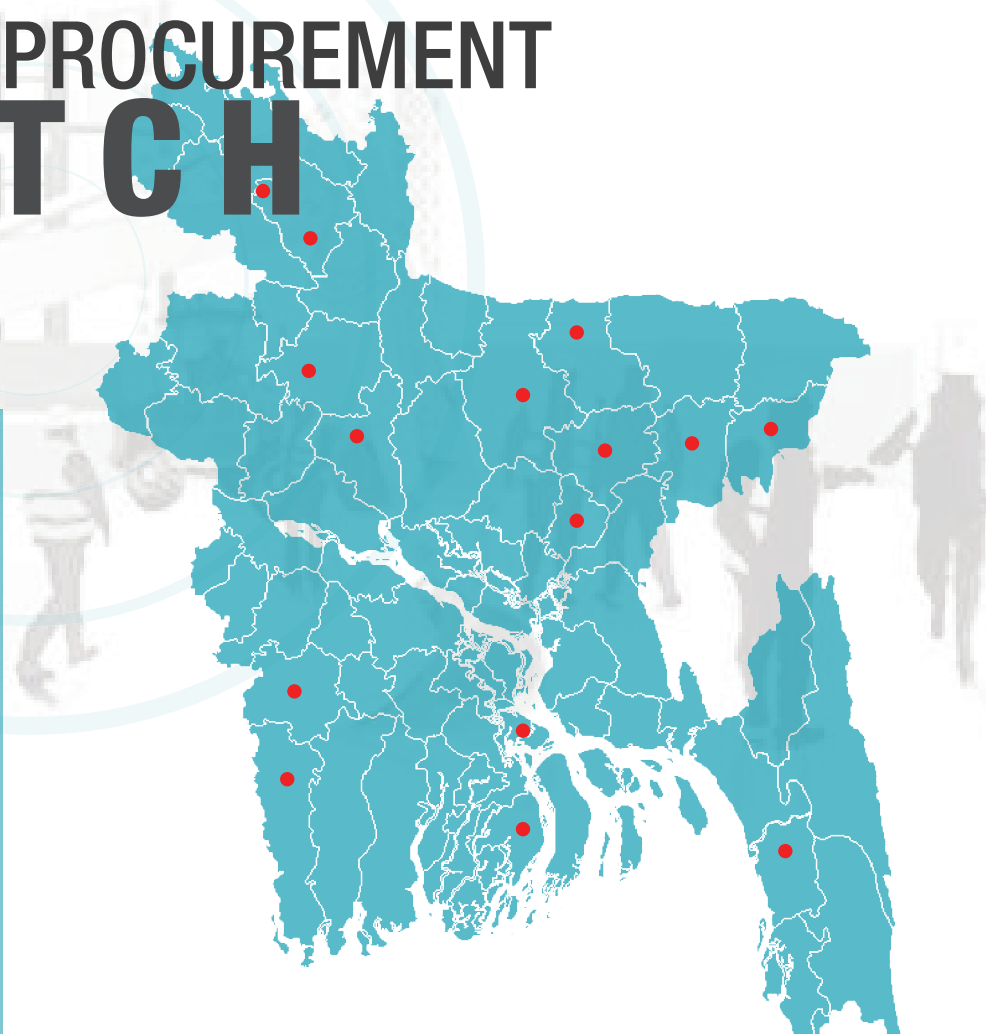
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THE REALITY OF MAINTAINING SOCIAL DISTANCE IN CORONA VS CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

— Mahan Ul Hoque

Similar to everything else during the COVID-19 crisis, the Citizen Engagement (CE) model under DIMAPPP has also been affected. From formation of citizen monitoring group to training the citizens and organizing awareness meeting after coordinating with the office of engineer, every activity ran smoothly until the government declared a general holiday on 25th March. Even the members of the citizen monitoring group supervised the quality of the ongoing work in the project sites all over the country. If the quality of the work was poor, they complained to the engineer and in most cases, the citizens put relentless effort until the issue was resolved.



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After government holiday was declared to limit the spread of the Coronavirus, the monitoring work started being affected. The necessity of staying at home meant physical monitoring part of the CE sub-component was being hindered as it stopped citizens from coming out and working together at the site.

First of all, every district and upazila LGED office shut down following government orders and our communication with the engineers moved over phone during the holiday. In most of our project sites, ongoing school, road, and other development works stopped because due to government holiday, engineer's office and field monitoring was off, and there was also limited scope of movement and lacking of workers in sites. During this time, we took real time updates from citizens on the few projects that could continue the construction and monitoring work. In this regard, our field officers kept continuous communication with the citizens via mobile phones. Moreover, informing the members of citizen monitoring group on social distancing, and the importance of washing hands, etc were discussed to increase their awareness. To be able to fulfill the target of the project by working with double or triple speed after government holiday ends, regular meetings have been organized with every field officers of BIGD and Brac. We have been always on the lookout to carry the project work forward by maintaining social distance in this crisis and by finding new methods. That is why our field officers rushed to the engineer's office immediately after government holiday ended and learned about the restarting time of the projects that were initiated before corona, and took list of the projects that were going to begin. Besides this, since cases of corona is still prevalent in Bangladesh, we have met with the engineers to decide on alternatives for organizing an informative meeting by maintaining social distance and about informing the citizens on the work of the project site.

Now, since the government holiday ended, formation of citizen monitoring groups and providing their orientation is going on full swing by maintaining social distancing. During corona, progressing project work while maintaining social distance was a challenge but it could not affect the spirit or enthusiasm of the citizens and instead, due to their self-interest they are still learning about the work wherever it is running. This is why, even during the pandemic, complaints were reported regarding the quality of the work and they were resolved too. Even if social distance slowed down the work initially, the dedication of citizens and their efficiency have progressed the work in new ways that could not have been thought of before.

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT BY MAINTAINING SOCIAL DISTANCE IN TIMES OF CORONA: AN INITIATIVE BY BRAC

— Rabiul Islam

Since 2019, Brac Community Empowerment Program (CEP) has been implementing the Digitizing Implementation Monitoring and Public Procurement Project (DIMAPPP) in field level. The project is being implemented in 48 upazilas of 16 districts of the 8 divisions in Bangladesh. But when the widespread corona epidemic also infected Bangladesh, the staffs of DIMAPPP ensured the engagement of local people by following the instructions of Bangladesh government and Brac. Monitoring activities are being continued in the ongoing projects in compliance with government guidelines and health regulations, and by maintaining social distance. In this state, the staffs are maintaining communication with the local citizens and upazila engineers using mobile phone, Messenger, Google Meet, Zoom, and other technological supports. Therefore, if there is any complaint regarding the quality of the project work, it is possible to inform the upazila engineer and take necessary steps based on that complaint. When launching new projects, decisions have been made after discussing with engineers on upazila and district level. Citizen monitoring groups have been formed by discussing with local authority and upazila engineer. In every case, health regulations and social distancing has been strictly maintained. Even though before the corona pandemic the direction was to form citizen monitoring group with 13 members, judging the current scenario, groups are being formed with 9 members until the corona situation is controlled. Out of the 9, 3 are women, 5 men, and 1 youth. But if there are more female representatives, then the number of male members will decrease and the total number of members will not be more than 9. Orientation of the citizen monitoring groups are being organized by following the government imposed health regulations and discussing with local authority and upazila engineer. There are regular hand washing facilities during orientation sessions and meetings and masks are being distributed when needed. Even if site meetings are organized based on discussions with local authority and upazila engineer, the number of members are not allowed over 10. Of course, the meetings are organized in the presence of upazila engineer or their representative. As



there are red zones in some project areas, activity has begun by only forming citizen monitoring groups and conducting their orientation. But in every site, sign boards have been put up with necessary information on the project. All the activities are being conducted by considering the government declared red, yellow and green zones.

A WINDOW OF INTERACTIONS

— Syeda Salina Aziz

Looking at his betel leaf stained teeth and shabby appearance, no one would take the person seriously. Rather, one would take a furtive glance and wonder why this person is sitting in the front row among many well-dressed government officials. Until he would confidently contest the speaker's claim.

In front of a number of high level government officials from Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) and Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU), who had just stated that the introduction of electronic procurement would bring a revolutionary change to Bangladesh's procurement experience, the man stood up and made his point in a casual tone and in colloquial Bangla.

'I disagree when you claim that e-GP is a way to introduce fairness and competition in the procurement process. Nowadays it has become very difficult to get the work done on time. A very important construction work in our city has been going on which needs to be finished within due time to secure additional funds, but the contractor has been very slow in delivering the work. If it had been assigned to a local contractor, we could have had some control over him and could make him deliver the work on time. However, since he is not local, we can't do anything about it. Isn't it wrong that e-GP allowed bidders from other areas to participate? If they are not local, they are not sincere and when they are not around, we can't really make things move.'

The IMED secretary took the question seriously and responded strongly. He provided many examples of procuring entities facing problems due to their lack of efficiencies regarding contract management. For instance, he referred to the usual delays that take place in the initial phases of a contract, which ultimately delays the entire process and leads to PEs rush towards the end.

Soon after he finished, many other participants started discussing both positive and negative sides of the existing procurement system.

Discussions regarding the presence of corruption and political influence in public procurement system has long been a taboo subject. However, in this forum government officials shared that they also fall victim to it. Thanks to this candid discussion, the otherwise formal event transformed into a lively forum where organizers struggled to finish on time.

This is a scene from the Sylhet Divisional Forum, which took place under the Citizen Engagement (CE) sub-component of Digitizing Implementation Monitoring and Public Procurement Project (DIMAPPP). CPTU and Brac Institute of governance and Development (BIGD) jointly host one divisional forum in each division. Although the level of enthusiasm varies, these forums generally provide an unconventional space for interactions among a diverse groups of stakeholders. The forums are designed to ensure participation of administrators and the government officials working in the locality, the local government representatives, bidders, journalists, lawyers, NGO workers, university teachers, and the citizen group members who are currently engaged in the monitoring of the development work under DIMAPPP. A team of government officials who are involved in policy making and regulating procuring activities of the country also fly from Dhaka to join these forums.

The objective of the forum is mainly to inform the local citizens about the government's citizen engagement initiatives in the local development work. However, with all the stakeholders discussing the problems and prospects of the procurement system, the platform also generates constructive debates and discussions.

The platform is unique in nature. Usually, in traditional government forums, the government officials hesitate to open up themselves in front of the senior officials due to prevalent bureaucratic culture. However, we see a different case in the DIMAPPP forums. The presence of various stakeholders with diverse opinions help them to open up. They really enjoy the participatory group discussions and quite enthusiastically present their own views in front of the forum. Bidders, whose voices usually remain unheard, also dare to speak their mind given the openness of the discussion forum.

Citizens too benefit from this. They read about the irregularities in the development work and observe them, although they barely get an insider view of how procurement policies are made or the projects are managed. The divisional forums gives them a peek inside the system. The lessons they take home from these forums tend to contribute to citizen's further engagement to the development process thereby making the procurement process more accountable and demand driven. Most importantly, the central level procuring authorities get to about the field level observations from a number of different stakeholders, which, one hopes, will contribute to the procurement reform of the country.

BGTF MARCHES FORWARD FOR INSTITUTIONALIZATION

The Bangladesh Government-Tenderers' Forum (BGTF), an apex body of the Government-Tenderers' Forums (GTFs) at district level, has been working for its institutionalization. During April-June 2020, the 5th and 6th meetings of the convening committee took place online.

Md. Abdus Sattar, Convener of BGTF and Executive Engineer, Procurement Unit, LGED chaired the meetings while Mr. Kazi Mozaharul Haque, Member Secretary of BGTF attended the program, among other members.

Md. Shoheler Rahman Chowdhury, Director General, CPTU, was present at the meeting as the chief guest. Mr. Shish Haider Chowdhury, Director, CPTU and Mr. Shafiq Alam, Senior Communication Consultant, CPTU also joined the meeting as special guests.

In the meetings, representatives from both tenderers and procuring entities recommended forming a framework whereby BGTF becomes a platform with an institutional and legal basis. After thorough scrutiny, a draft Memorandum of Association (MoA) of BGTF has been prepared in Bangla.

The BGTF aimed at working as the central nodal body for coordinating the activities of GTFs and maintaining liaison with high-level policy bodies including Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) of the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) under the Ministry of Planning. The objectives of the BGTF is to create a scope for dialogue between the two parties to clarify confusions rising out in public procurement sector.

Bangladesh Center for Communication Programs (BCCP) has conceptualized, designed, tested and provided support for formulating the forum. BCCP, under DIMAPPP, is working to institutionalize BGTF as a sustainable and open platform for all the relevant stakeholders. With BCCP's support, the convening committee is assisting in forming a formal committee with a structured Memorandum of Association (MoA), preparing a work-plan, and in confirming a legal structure.

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN FIELD LEVEL

Tri-monthly update

Activity	Until June 2020
Group formation	78
Group Orientation	78
Site meeting	83
Citizen's grievances	97
Complaints of Citizen monitoring group	75

FEW IMAGES OF OUR OFFICERS AND CITIZENS WORKING DURING CORONA



Supervision of work by members of citizen monitoring committee in Keshabpur, Jashore.



Formation of citizen monitoring group in Sirajganj sadar



Taking advice from the LGED executive engineer of Shatkhira on update of work during coron.



Work supervision by citizen monitoring group members of Raiganj upazila of Sirajganj



Orientation being provided to citizen monitoring group members on determining the quality of construction work in Kotiyadi of Kishoreganj district



Organizing citizen awareness meeting in limited capacity by following suggestions of LGED office and maintaining social distance in the presence of engineer, contractor and citizens in Keshabpur of Jashore.

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