



STATE OF SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY IN BANGLADESH

CURRENT DYNAMICS AND FUTURE PATHWAYS



STATE OF GOVERNANCE 2018

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Study Team

Mirza Hassan (Team Leader)
Maheen Sultan (Research Co-ordinator)
Bayazid Hasan
Erina Mahmud
Farhana Razzaque
Miskat Jahan
Sahida Islam Khondaker
Susmita Acharjee

Reviewer

Parsa Sanjana Sajid

Cover Design and Layout

Md. Abdur Razzaque

Summary Report State of Governance 2018

Dr. Mirza Hassan, Senior Research Fellow and Head, Governance and Politics Cluster is the author of this summary SoG report

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1. INTRODUCTION

The State of Governance (SoG) 2018 report of Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) deals with both formal (institutional) and informal (societal) dimensions of *Social Accountability* (SA) and *deliberative democratic practices* in Bangladesh.

The report explores the dynamics of SA within the interfaces between state/public authority and civil society/citizens/community. A central focus of the report has been to critically explore the prevailing nature of accountability between the two and thus, it empirically documents and develops analytic narratives of the social accountability initiatives in Bangladesh in recent decades. It covers a broader arena, such as Union Parishad (UP)-based development projects and social protection programmes, school governance (both urban and rural, and primary and secondary). This report summarises and interprets the salient findings of SoG 2018 and attempts to tease out policy implications for governance reform of SA institutions.

We define *accountability* as an obligation of the state/public authority to be accountable for their actions. In the case of public representatives in Bangladesh, citizens predominantly attain accountability through participating in periodic elections. This is defined as *electoral or vertical accountability*, which only allows citizens to hold their elected representatives accountable at certain intervals—for example, every five years,

in the case of UP in Bangladesh. Thus, electoral accountability does not allow citizens to hold their elected leaders accountable during the interim period.

SA can overcome this limitation by allowing citizens to monitor the performances of the representatives, bargain and negotiate/re negotiate policy decisions, and provide useful inputs into the management of developmental allocations and modalities of service deliveries on a *routine and ongoing basis*. Clearly, such ongoing citizen engagements can make governance and developmental processes inclusive as well as efficient.

Social accountability is “an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e. in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organisations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability” of the state/public authority.

(Malena et al., 2004, p. 3)

SA-related policies and institutions have been introduced in Bangladesh only in recent decades, except for the School Management Committee (SMC), which has been in function since the early seventies. The Local Government Act, 2009¹ provides the basis for subsequent development of SA institutions and complementary laws and policies. Prominent among these are Ward Committee (WC), Scheme Supervision Committee (SSC), Ward *Shobha*, and Open Budget Meeting (OBM) in UPs. All of these SA institutions can also be recognised as deliberative democratic spaces; as such, assessment of deliberative democratic practice in Bangladesh is also a focus of this report.

These institutional spaces² allow citizens to provide direct inputs into development policies and the opportunity to monitor project implementation and service delivery.

Three vital conditions for a functional deliberative democratic process:

- ▶ Absence of distorting factors—coercion/manipulation by the political or social elites.
- ▶ Inclusive process—all citizens, irrespective of socio-economic class, gender, religion, etc. must be able to participate.

¹The implicit objectives of enactment of such laws/rules/policies were to garner consent from the bottom (poor men and women, and marginalised groups) to make development and service delivery processes more efficient, equitable, and participatory.

²We follow Gaventa (2006, p. 26) to define space in our research context as "...opportunities, moments and channels where citizen can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests."

- ▶ Consequential deliberation—the process must bring results: formally (e.g. formulation of new policies, laws, rules) and informally (e.g. changing undesirable norms and informal governance processes).

(Dryzek, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Parkinson & Manbridge, 2012)

Very simply, deliberative democracy means talk-based democratic decision-making process—generally but not exclusively (think of digital communication platforms)—in a setting (e.g. physical space) where citizens have the opportunity for face-to-face, open, reiterative, and interactive communications to reach a rationally-motivated consensus.

Deliberative democracy, by definition, is an instrument of attaining SA, but the converse is not necessarily true. For instance, media platforms or social movements are mechanisms of SA but these are not deliberative spaces.

Like electoral democracy, deliberative democracy relies on individual preferences, knowledge, and voting. But in contrast, deliberative democracy does not allow individuals to express their preferences in isolation (secret voting); it has to be done openly and collectively, providing both citizens and their elected representatives a space for inclusive participation leading to "mutual justification, listening, respect, reflection, and openness to persuasion" (Science Policy Forum, 2019, p. 1145). Majoritarian decision-making is permitted only as the second-best choice.

This means that deliberative democracy allows participants to shift their positions/

opinions/views in relation to an issue *while deliberating*. Representative democracy, through elections, can only aggregate preferences but deliberative democracy *transforms* them (Elster, 1998). In this sense, deliberative democracy tends to be more attuned to the dynamism of human nature—individual preferences/views are not fixed but prone to change/transform due to deliberation, communication, or interaction with others. Secret voting—or more generally, electoral democracy—is rarely capable of addressing such shifting preferences of citizens until the next election. All of these conceptual and practical rationales convinced us to explore the prevailing dynamics of SA and deliberative institutions/forums³ in Bangladesh as the preferred topic for SoG 2018.

1.1 OVERARCHING QUESTIONS, CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK, AND THE EMPIRICAL DOMAINS OF THE RESEARCH

The SoG report raised and addressed the following overarching questions: Have the SA institutions enhanced the capacity of ordinary citizens to provide inputs into decision-making and planning of local development projects as well as efficiently monitor the service delivery processes? Have these institutions opened up spaces for citizens to effectively voice their grievances and concerns regarding the governance of service delivery institutions? Can citizens now better articulate their felt needs and effectively deliberate or negotiate their demands with their representatives? Have the deliberative spaces managed to embed deliberative democracy at the local level?

³ Throughout the text we will use the terms SA and deliberative forums/spaces interchangeably.

To answer these questions, we used two levels of enquiry. First, we analysed the meta-level factors: workings of the politics (political elites' influence on and capture of institutions, dynamics of patron clientelism), sociology of the communities (status, class, kinship, gender), and prevailing societal norms (patriarchy, deference to social hierarchy, norms and incentives influencing citizenship). Given these meta-level structural factors, we then intended to examine how and to what extent citizens actually exercise their agency (or have the necessary incentives to do so) by using the available SA or deliberative democratic institutions to demand and attain accountability of the service providers and secure desired resources. The focus on the individual incentives required our conceptual framework to also utilise micro-level analytical tools.

This summary report, which aims to analyse the dynamics of the SA and deliberative institutions/forums, develops analytic narratives⁴ on the following four thematic domains/cases:

1. Pilot SA forum for monitoring social protection programmes at the UP level,
2. SMCs at primary and secondary schools in both urban and rural settings,
3. Deliberative committees at the UP level (WC and SSC), and
4. Deliberative forums at the UP level (Ward *Shobha* and OBM).

⁴ It is a narrative since it "...pays close attention to stories, accounts, and context [our four cases]. It is analytic in that it extracts explicit and formal lines of reasoning, which facilitate both exposition and explanation." (Bates et al., 1998, p. 10)

Examining such varied SA institutions/forums enabled us to understand the effects of different meta-level determinants (as mentioned above) on the micro (individual) incentives and behaviour of relevant actors that in turn tend to affect SA forums' capacity and institutional integrity.

The report argues that these meta and micro variables need to be explored in a recursive⁵ manner to understand the nature and effects of the feedback loops, both positive and negative, between the two variables. We also argue that individual agency incentives of the actors need to be analysed at a granular level. Such analysis will help us better understand the dysfunctionalities or challenges—institutional and social—that these SA forums face and appreciate the effectiveness. This will also help us reflect on the nature of external interventions that could nudge these SA/deliberative spaces away from a dysfunctional equilibrium towards a functional one to reach the normatively desired state. The indicators to judge the efficacy of the two pathways of SA forums

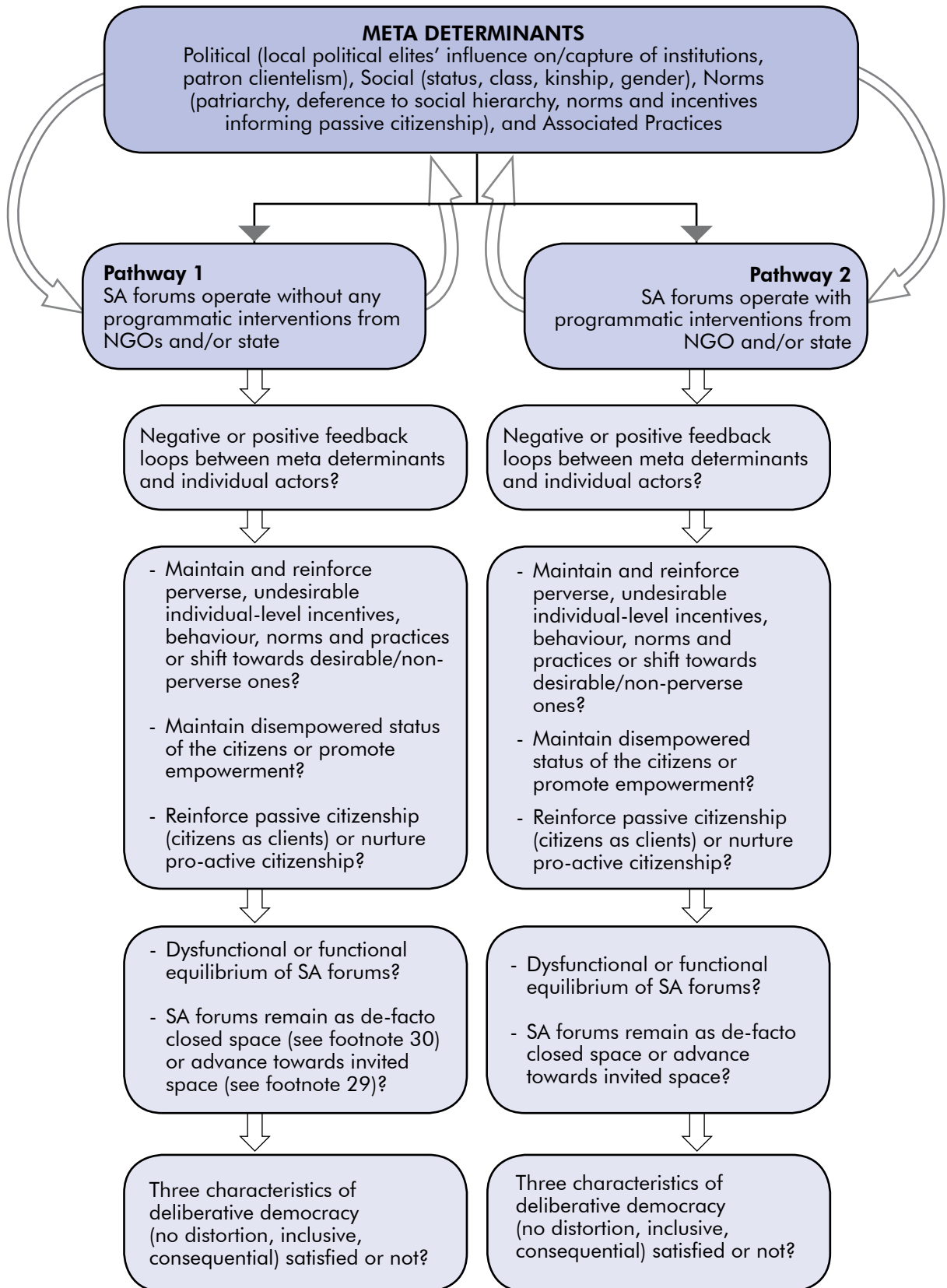
(one evolving on its own and the other nudged by the interventions from non-government organisations and the state) are shown below graphically (Figure 1).

1.2 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The sections of this report are structured in the following way: Section 2 provides a summary of the methodology. Section 3 (subsections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4) provides the summaries of the four case studies conducted for the SoG report. This section also analytically interprets the findings. Section 4 concludes this report and reflects broadly on the overall findings and teases out relevant policy implications. Finally, Section 5 summarises the key recommendations.

⁵This implies that the nature and effects of the ensuing feedback loops (linking meta-level structural factors with individual agency), both positive and negative, need to be understood and explained.

Figure 1: The two pathways of the evolution of SA/deliberative forums



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2. METHODOLOGY

The SoG study applied qualitative research methods—Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)—for collecting the primary data. In addition, reviews of relevant government documents and policy-relevant academic literature were conducted. KIIs with 206 individuals (SA forum members, committee members, government officials, UP representatives, NGO representatives, civil society representatives, general citizens, guardians, teachers) and 16 FGDs with citizen participants of *Shobhas* and OBMs were also carried out.

The research sites of the social protection study included two Upazilas, purposively selected in consultation with *Manusher Jonno Foundation*. Upazilas were selected where project activities were expected to continue beyond the life of the project. Two Unions in turn were selected from each Upazila.

For the SMC study, data was collected from eight (four government primary and four non-government secondary) schools in two categories from both rural and urban areas in Dhaka and Chattogram districts.

For the studies on WC, SSC, Ward *Shobha*, and OBM, eight Unions were selected from two divisions based on the following criteria:

- ▶ Four Unions where NGO-led project interventions are ongoing with WC, SSSC, Ward *Shobha*, and OBM;
- ▶ Two Unions without ongoing NGO interventions but where such interventions have been recently completed;

- ▶ Two Unions without any NGO interventions;

Based on the relevant studies,⁶ we assumed that NGOs tend to play a critical role in making UP-based SA institutions functional and without NGO support and nurture, these spaces usually remain largely dysfunctional. Through these studies, we wanted to empirically test this assumption. The above three criteria for site selection were thus, adopted to find out whether WC, SSC, Ward *Shobha*, and OBM can function properly without any NGO support; what happens to them when NGO support is withdrawn; and finally, to observe how these SA spaces function with NGO support. NGO support broadly includes managerial/financial training for the UP leaders and citizen members, financial/logistical support for the event management, and mobilisation of the citizens.

⁶Hassan & Nazneen, 2013; Ahmed, Razzaque, & Rashid, 2016; Chowdhury, 2016.

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3. ANALYTIC NARRATIVES OF THE DYNAMICS OF SA/DELIBERATIVE FORUMS

3.1 SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND EFFICIENT AND TRANSPARENT IMPLEMENTATION OF SOCIAL PROTECTION SCHEMES IN RURAL SETTINGS

The first case examines the functioning of a SA forum—*Forums for Social Protection* (FSP)—designed and deployed to steer a pilot SA intervention to monitor social protection programmes in the selected UPs. The pilot was organised by *Manusher Jonno Foundation* (MJF) with partnering local non-government organisations (NGOs). The intervention also had formal endorsement of the government—the Cabinet Division, more specifically.

The Government of Bangladesh has formulated a *National Social Security Strategy* (NSSS), which aims to develop a rights-based social security system for the citizens. As the social security schemes serve the large group of poor and disadvantaged citizens spread across the country, the government has emphasised the role of local administration, locally elected representatives, and NGOs in ensuring efficient and equitable delivery of benefits to the recipients.

To strengthen the governance and administration of the overall social security system, the government has taken many strategies. An important strategy is to pilot SA mechanisms for monitoring the targeting process to make it more efficient and transparent. This study focuses on one such SA pilot programme, which aimed to ensure that social protection schemes/services reached the

intended beneficiaries. This was done under the programme for *Strengthening Government Social Protection* (SGSP) in Bangladesh, implemented in 16 districts in collaboration with different NGO partners. The pilot ended in June 2017.

This pilot programme developed FSPs that worked reasonably well and a principal reason for its success was that it could develop a synergy among the citizens, elected leaders of the local government, UP-level frontline government officials, and the local government service providing agencies. The intervention had many positive impacts on the social protection schemes: better targeting (of beneficiaries), decreased leakages, and efficient grievance collections and resolutions. Better outcomes also lend legitimacy to FSP as an efficient SA forum. It provided practical lessons for designing effective models for citizens' participation

in social protection schemes utilising grievance redress mechanisms.

In addition to grievance management, the experimentation with FSP generated valuable knowledge for the relevant local authorities (service providing agencies) for taking corrective actions to improve implementation and further refining policies related to social protection.

FSP was essentially an institutional hybrid of local community and NGOs, created to ensure good governance practices—transparency and accountability—for making social protection programmes effective. The pilot intervention was also supervised by the central government authority, the Cabinet Division in this case, which issued several directives to improve programme operations and plans to further improve the system by introducing information and communications technology (ICT), especially for identifying, documenting, and selecting beneficiaries. The study, however, warns that without facilitation/nurturing (by administrative authorities and preferably, in collaboration with local NGOs) of the citizen-led complaints process, the grievance mechanisms which are being piloted, may not be sustainable.

Although, all line ministries established grievance redressal mechanisms about ten years ago, these mechanisms largely remained dormant due to citizens' lack of demand. This was possibly due to two reasons: a) absence of any institutional mechanisms/space through which citizens could articulate their grievances to the state and b) inefficient resolution of grievances, which perhaps disincentivise them to file complaints.

FSP precisely aimed to correct these two problems. The intervention included:

The SA initiative was a win-win game for both citizens (as beneficiaries of social protection-related services) and line ministry frontline officials. The former benefited by having the space for expressing their grievances to and securing instant responses from the elected leaders. For the frontline officials, FSP essentially complemented their efforts by identifying eligible beneficiaries, monitoring timely distribution of benefits, and curtailing exchange of bribes. The government officials acknowledged that forum members had much-needed necessary local knowledge—a critical factor for efficient targeting.

a) establishing a forum for enabling collective engagement of citizens, b) deploying SA tools, including verbal complaining process, complaint cards and complaint boxes, service booths, mobile hotlines, community scorecards, public hearings, and social audit, c) facilitating citizens' interfaces with the service providing institutions, d) introduction of an effective grievance redressal mechanism, and e) building capacity of the local civil society organisation involved in facilitation of citizen engagement. The National Forum for Social Protection (NFSP) served as a coordinating link to the local citizen forums at the district, Upazila, Union, and municipal levels. The main function of the NFSP was to bring grassroots views to policymakers for necessary policy reformation.

The NGO interventions in FSP were extensive; detailed activities included: convening meetings at the UP offices with relevant people to establish these platforms, arranging and facilitating monthly meetings and courtyard gatherings, identifying irregularities by scrutinising beneficiary documents, facilitating meetings with UP members

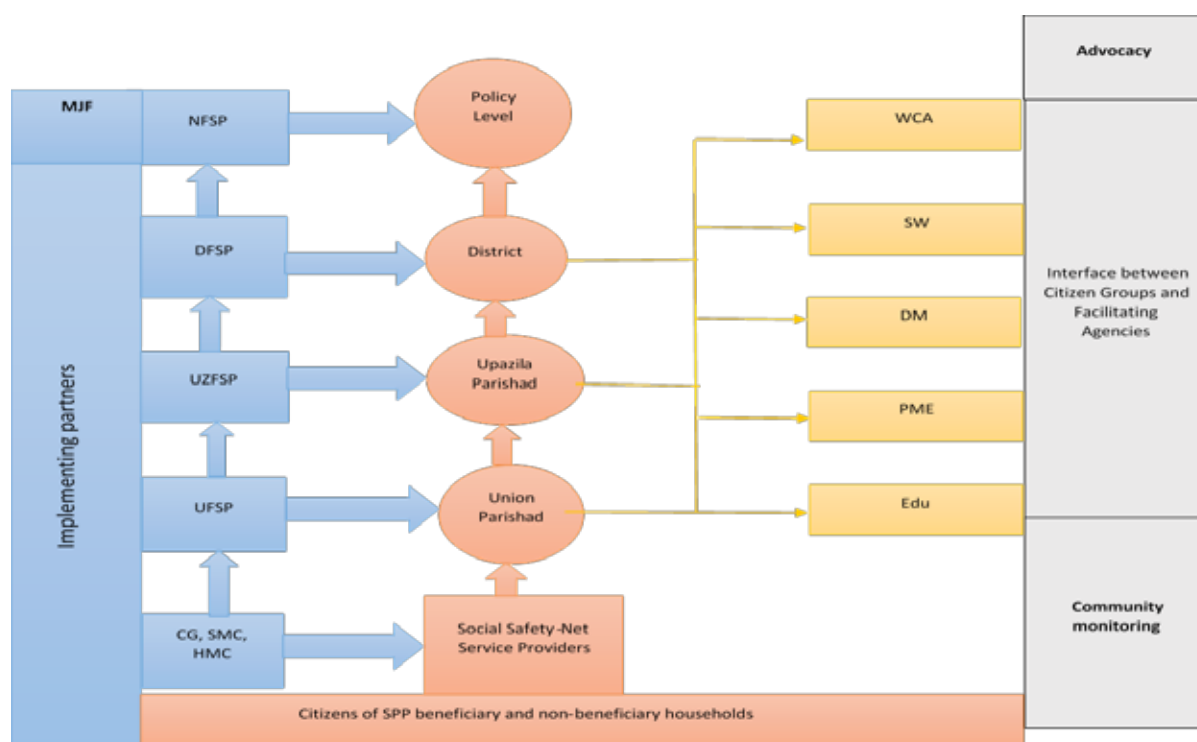
and Chairpersons for revisions to the lists (in case of irregularities), providing training to forum members, facilitating meetings between FSP members and local service providing government agencies, and arranging community fairs, among others. Figure 2 below shows the detailed project set up.

Although, based on the local community, the design of the pilot SA intervention ensured that there was a buy-in and involvement of the local and national level bureaucracy (line ministries). Among the bureaucratic actors, the role of the Upazila Nirbahi Officer

(UNO) proved to be critical as the coordinating agent who facilitated the links among the line ministries, elected local government officials, and citizens; and thereby, creating synergy among these actors. Such synergy was needed for efficient grievance management. The involvement and 'endorsement' of the UNO also ensured that elected officials took citizens' complaints seriously.

The study made it clear that NGO support (both financial and institutional), motivation and building awareness, and the capacity of the citizens tend to play a critical role in making SA interventions

Figure 2: Citizen engagement and institutional interaction flowchart



Source: Adapted from SGSP-MJF proposal

MJF: Manusher Jonno Foundation; NFSP: National Forum for Social Protection; DFSP: District Forum for Social Protection; UZFSP: Upazila Forum for Social Protection; CG: Community Group; SMC: School Management Committee; HMC: Health Centre Management Committee

Ministries involved- WCA: Women & Children Affairs; SW: Social Welfare; DM: Disaster Management; PME: Primary & Mass Education; Edu: Education

Ministry of Planning (MoP), Ministry of Finance (MoF), Ministry of Local Government, Ministry of Rural Development and Co-operatives (LGRD), Ministry of Health & Family Planning (HFP)

SGSP-IA: SGSP Implementing Agencies (WFP, WB, UNDP, MJF, and Management Agency)

effective, as in the cases of other formal SA forums/institutions discussed later in the report.

Meta-level determinants such as local politics are found to influence the nature of FSP functioning. The study noted that political elites (of the ruling party) in this case, operated in a slightly different manner. They avoided directly influencing FSP, rather utilised local government representatives (UP leaders) as 'proxies'. For instance, political elites did not influence the selection of social protection beneficiaries or the distribution of allowances. They did not attempt either to positively engage or negatively influence the operations of the social protection forum; as UP members and Chairpersons are themselves affiliated with the party in power, they were able to act on behalf of the party. However, in the cases of distribution of a large number of resources, it potentially allows the local political elites to take cuts from it for personal enrichment or for distributing among their political clients. They were eager to remain directly involved in the process—for instance, in the case of preparation of beneficiary lists.

Similar to other cases of SA forums/institutions, the question of sustainability of FSP type interventions remains an elephant in the room. The FSP in study areas has been inactive since the last one year, after the project along with NGO facilitation and support ended. Many of the citizen respondents of the study wanted the forum to be active again since they realised that the active forum decreased irregularities in the social protection schemes. As the forum is currently dormant, they fear that such irregularities they witnessed before the pilot intervention, might re-emerge. Also, the social capital that was generated with the help of NGOs is now being depleted.

3.2 SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR: CASES OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEES IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The second case study involves the examination of a community-based organisation known as School Management Committee (SMC).⁷ With potentially significant role in better governance of the schools, SMC has been recognised as a SA forum; since SMC members are usually from surrounding communities, including parents of the students of schools located in those communities, they have good knowledge about the functioning and performance of the schools and the moral authority and legitimacy to take the necessary steps to solve governance problems. As our ensuing analysis will indicate, such advantages—which tend to be unevenly distributed among the members of the committee—cannot guarantee that SMCs will be effective in monitoring the schools. To understand the necessary conditions for SMCs to function effectively as an

⁷ The Directorate of Primary Education of the Ministry of Education provides the legal framework for both primary and secondary School Management Committees. According to a government circular, all government-supported primary schools are required to have a School Management Committee with eleven members (two teachers from the school including the head, two local persons interested in education, land donor, a teacher from the nearest high school, and five parents). Similar SMCs are also mandatory at non-government secondary schools (committee consists of local elites, teacher representatives, guardians, and local officers of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education). This committee is responsible for mobilising resources, approving budgets, securing school funds, controlling expenditures, and appointing and disciplining staff. The committee is also responsible for teacher's appointment and removal. *'Intermediate and Secondary level Non-government Educational Institute Rules, 2009'* defines the structures and overall functions of the governing body and the management committee of intermediate and secondary level non-government educational institutions.

SA mechanism, meta-level determinants of the SMC and resultant micro-level incentives of the members need to be explained.

The case study provides empirical evidence regarding the extent to which SMCs are effectively involved in monitoring school governance and whether the members have the incentives to make teachers accountable. The evidence is mixed.

Independent of any external support (by the state officials or NGOs), SMCs actually turned out to be relatively functional compared to other SA forums—at least SMC meetings are held regularly and there is some degree of monitoring of teachers and construction work. Except for two (both secondary schools), all other SMCs that this study looked at, did manage to carry out their assigned responsibilities to some extent.

However, only a few SMC presidents and members actually attempt to monitor teachers' performances. Intriguingly, many SMC citizen members tend to believe that they do not have the mandate to monitor teachers' performance. It is worth noting, by monitoring teaching quality, most SMC members mean whether the teachers attend classes regularly and timely.

Moreover, most of the SMC members were selected based on their political loyalties or personal connections to locally influential political elites; many schools were found to be effectively controlled by such political actors. So, it is reasonable to ask whether such SMC members have the necessary commitment and/or 'political' autonomy to make the school authority accountable.

Still one can argue, as the available evidence indicates, independent of any

external support (by the state officials or NGOs) SMCs actually turned out to be more functional compared to other SA forums that the SoG study has investigated. Except for two (both secondary schools), all other SMCs that this study looked at, did manage to carry out their assigned responsibilities. The two secondary schools failed in this regard because these SMCs could not meet on a regular basis, which is their formal mandate. The reasons for not meeting regularly were that one of the SMCs was found to be hardly functional and the president of the other SMC, who was an MP, remained very busy with his personal business and political activities and could not provide any time for the SMC.

SMC's role as a SA forum seems to be largely constrained by local politics. The study found that SMC general members have remained essentially hostages to the whims of powerful political elites, who cannot be prevented from meddling in the school affairs or from 'capturing' the pivotal position of the SMC, notably that of the president. This position is important since the president's commitment is critical for SMC effectiveness and consequently, school performance.

And here comes the sociology—such commitment tends to be positively correlated with elite family background and social status of the president as well as other SMC members. Elite members of SMC associate their membership status with social prestige and believe that they can preserve and enhance their reputation by improving school performance, creating strong incentives for their commitment to the development of the school. Such social reputation or honour-related incentives have drawn individuals to SMCs who tend to be otherwise uninterested in education or school management. These individuals

are mostly found to be involved in local social work and command respect in the local community. Note that these observations are only true for SMCs at the secondary schools.

Also, because of this prevailing sociological dynamics, poor guardians are clearly unable (or more likely choose not to get involved due to lack of 'capacity to aspire'⁸—inevitable in a deeply hierarchical and status-conscious society) to get involved in the SMCs and thus, effectively remain inconsequential in school governance. This is especially true for public schools in rural areas where the majority of the students come from poor families.

Local political dynamics and the sociology of the local community are also manifested in the way SMCs are formed, i.e. the process of member selection. Because of the dual dynamics, the formations of SMCs tend to diverge considerably from the prescribed rules.⁹ The first dynamic is evident in the fact that SMC members are predominantly selected by a coterie of political elites. Often MPs and

occasionally ministers get directly involved in the SMC member selection process. *Biddayotshahi*¹⁰ members tend to be related to local politics or connected to the local MPs. Local MPs usually influence the selection of SMC presidents and their choices are hardly contested by other elite members of the community.

Because of political interference and partisan considerations, many less educated and incompetent individuals tend to get included in SMCs. Political links of SMC members can also affect SMC's capacity to monitor. For instance, when an MP's wife serves as the SMC president, the SMC general members' operational freedom and space for manoeuvre become considerably narrower.

The second dynamic is manifested in the predominance of SMC members with elite backgrounds—retired government officials, NGO workers, teachers, private service holders, social workers, businesspersons, politicians, homemakers from well-to-do families, and rich farmers. Only in rural primary schools, some of the guardians and general members tend to come from non-elite backgrounds. In the case of selection, most of the SMC members (guardians and non-guardians) were selected by either school teachers or headteachers or SMC presidents. For instance, women guardian members from both primary and secondary SMCs were chosen from the social network and kinship of the headteachers, SMC presidents, or male *Biddayotshahi* SMC members. Moreover, headteachers and presidents of SMCs co-opted members based on their economic status.

⁸ Appadurai (2004) conceptualises *aspiration* as a socio-cultural category and not as an individual trait. Capacity to aspire (capacity to navigate) is then predicated on the individual's social, cultural, and economic experiences.

⁹ One such prominent deviation is the de facto method of SMC member selection. Despite provisions for direct elections to choose SMC guardian members, at primary schools, most of them were taken through a selection process. In the case of SMCs at the secondary schools, guardian members were picked through both election and selection, although the latter method predominates. Local elites' lack of motivation in SA also partially explains the preference of selection over election. As evidence indicates, elections did not occur in most of the schools due to lack of enough enthusiastic candidates for membership positions. On such demand side constraints, the study noted that this is a general pattern where members of SMCs needed to be prodded by the school authorities to become members. Most of the guardian members at the observed primary and secondary schools mentioned that they became SMC members at the request of school authorities or local political leaders.

¹⁰ *Biddayotshahi* refers to a person who is an enthusiastic promoter of education in the community.

For both social and political dynamics, SMC members not only tend to be incompetent in their roles but also lack interest in school governance. The study found that many SMC members do not know their responsibilities, neither did they receive any capacity building training. The consequence is, all the responsibilities of the SMC—decision-making, agenda-setting, fund management, monitoring teachers' performance/attendance, and infrastructure development—for ensuring the accountability of the school authority and teachers, in practice, fall on three actors only: the president of the committee, the headteacher (as the Secretary member of the SMC), and to a lesser extent, teacher representatives (the role of the SMC president tend to become more prominent/dominant in the case of secondary schools). The guardians and other general members tend to remain outside this process, diminishing the effectiveness of SMCs as a SA forum.

More perniciously, the general members actually believe that to make SMC effective, the role of the president is necessary and sufficient. There are indeed 'rational' reasons for such belief. One major reason is that SMC general members of primary schools in rural areas, who tend to have non-elite backgrounds, feel less confident about evaluating teachers' performance and prefer to delegate such responsibility to the president, who is usually, as noted earlier, socially and politically influential.

This belief is strengthened because the guardian members found that teachers usually ignore them and are reluctant to take any corrective actions. In general, teachers, as government employees, ignore citizen groups and feel they should be accountable to government authorities only.

Interestingly, guardian members themselves do not feel that they have the obligations and rights to make teachers accountable to them. When they were asked whether they could hold the teachers accountable for their performances, many answered that their responsibilities, as SMC members, were to ensure education quality and not teachers' accountability; it seems that they do not understand the link between the two. And by 'education quality' they understood: regular attendance of the students and teachers and the teachers 'taking care' of the children as a part of their obligations to the community.¹¹ The measure of 'taking care' is subjective in nature and such community expectations from the teacher tend to constitute a 'moral economy' (societal dynamics whereby the expected roles of individual actors are informed by the norms of goodness, fairness, moral obligations, reciprocity, and justice)¹² -based accountability structure that exerts normative pressure on the teachers to perform and carry out their duties. This is clearly not the idea of accountability in the formal/legal sense that tends to conceptually inform standard literature (particularly good governance literature of multilateral and bi-lateral donors) on SA or governance in

¹¹ SMC presidents at both primary and secondary schools and one or two active SMC members from secondary schools were found to regularly visit schools to check teachers' attendance and performances. On the other hand, primary school SMC members in rural areas felt less confident about evaluating teachers' performance. But the scenario was slightly better in urban primary schools where guardians with more education and interest in their children's education. The study, although, did not find any evidence that despite the interest they actually did any monitoring of the schools.

¹² Historian E. P. Thompson (1971, p. 79) argued that people's expectations from or grievances against authority tend to operate "within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices..." Such consensus by turn is based on a "consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations...which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor."

developing countries. A nuanced analysis incorporating the moral economy dimension of the social accountability, we would argue, can lead to a deeper understanding of the SA process in local communities and a better appreciation of social actors' incentives and expectations.

Formally, SMCs have an important role in the school's financial management. The research reveals that only a few SMC members (other than the president) get involved in fund management. Hardly any guardian SMC members were found to be concerned or aware of managing school funds; they feel they have little control over school's fund management as it is controlled by the bureaucratic authorities (in the case of public primary schools). Because of such control, the

SMC members lack incentives in taking ownership of school funds and spending.

Most SMC members perceive SMCs as an institutional tool of improving school infrastructure rather than holding the teachers accountable for their activities as discussed earlier. Enthusiastic guardian members of secondary schools were keen to monitor school's infrastructural works. Guardian members in primary schools were not found interested in it. However, headteachers often encouraged the guardian members to monitor development work for fulfilling formal SMC procedural requirements.

Table 1 presents a comparative assessment of the existing governance of SMCs in primary and secondary schools.

Table 1: Comparative assessment of de facto governance of SMCs in primary and secondary schools

Indicators	Primary school SMCs	Secondary school SMCs
SMCs functional?	Yes, all	Yes, except one
Membership selection process	Selection (always informal) by headteachers, other teachers, SMC presidents, area MPs	Both election and selection (the latter is always informal)
Meetings	Regular	Regular where SMCs function well Irregular where SMCs are dysfunctional
Agenda-setting	Headteacher and SMC president jointly set agenda where the headteacher plays the key role	Headteacher and SMC president jointly set agenda where the headteacher plays the key role
Decision-making	Opinions sought from meeting attendees but headteacher and president finalise it	Opinions sought from meeting attendees but headteacher (in few cases) and president (in most of the cases) are ultimate decision-makers
Fund management	Headteacher and SMC president are the key actors None of the guardian members is involved	Headteacher and SMC president are the key actors Sometimes one or two other members also track income-expenditure
SMCs' role in monitoring teachers' performance	Mostly SMC president monitors teachers' performance	SMC president and two/three guardian members regularly visit the school to monitor teachers' performance
SMCs' role in monitoring development projects	In general, SMC members, except the president, are not interested in monitoring development projects However, in some cases, members do so at the request of school authority	SMC president and other active guardian members (where SMCs are functional) monitor development projects
Effectiveness of SMCs as a social accountability mechanism	Somewhat effective regarding infrastructure development and less effective in ensuring teacher accountability	In most cases, SMCs are effective in dealing with infrastructural development. However, committees are moderately effective in improving education quality and exacting accountability of the teachers

3.3 DELIBERATIVE COMMITTEES AS SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY FORUMS

The third case study deals with the UP-based Ward Committee (WC) and Scheme Supervision Committee (SSC). (The findings are summarised in Table 2 and Table 3.) These two committees were set up to embed citizen engagement in UP governance and to assure transparency and accountability of the UPs. But in practice, domination by the UP leaders (especially by the Chairperson) and lack of awareness of committee members tend to limit the effectiveness of WC and SSC in holding UP Chairpersons and Ward Councillors accountable. These committees are expected to work as interlocutors between the local community and the UP leaders so that the latter can be made accountable to the former in relation to service delivery and implementation of development projects. The origin of WC and SSC lies with GoB-initiated *Local Governance Support Project* (LGSP) in 2006.¹³ One of the core components of LGSP is the institutionalisation of social accountability mechanisms in

UP's administrative structures to ensure formal citizen engagement in the process of procurement, project formulation, project implementation, supervision, and monitoring.

The case study revealed that the formation processes of these deliberative committees (WC and SSC) tend to deviate from the formal guidelines (see footnote 13). Though these committees should be formed at Ward *Shobhas* with the consent from Ward *Shobha* participants (general citizens), in most cases, UP Chairpersons and members themselves select their 'loyal supporters/followers' (relatives of the UP Chairperson, politically influential individuals, and people from UP Chairperson's and members' inner circle) as members of these committees. Even NGO interventions have minimum effect on correcting such deviations, since NGOs usually shy away from dealing with politically intractable issues and powerful actors. When it comes to governance issues, the typical mode of NGO interventions is to accept this political status quo and navigate carefully around it.¹⁴

¹³ According to the guideline, WCs are formed for all UPs at the Ward level consisting of seven members, including at least two women members. The committee members are supposed to be elected from Ward meetings through deliberative democratic process (open voting and consensus-based). The WC is supposed to be chaired by an elected male or female Ward Councillor. For the reserved seat, the women Councillor represents at least one WC by rotation. WC is supposed to select local-level scheme (development projects), implement such schemes, and ensure participation of the community in the implementation process. The WC, along with the relevant officials, is supposed to conduct the environmental and social screening exercises and select the desired schemes (chosen by the community) to propose to the UPs. While the UPs manage and allocate the Basic Block Grants to the Wards, the WCs is supposed to implement the selected schemes, and arrange for the mitigation of their environmental and social impacts. The committee can collect bills, vouchers, master rolls, and then submit them to UPs for audit and other activities.

Ward-level SSCs are formed consisting of seven members selected from the members of the local community. Among them, one would be a local government officer nominated by the UNO. The committee members are supposed to be elected from *Shobha* through deliberative democratic processes. The SSC is supposed to be chaired by a chosen community member. The responsibilities of SSC are to design the schemes and ensure the quality of their implementation processes. It is also responsible for ensuring that implementation process comply with the environmental and social safeguards. The SSC will also undertake inspection of implementation progress using an Implementation Review Form and if there are problems, will ask the WC to take remedial measures.

¹⁴ In donors-produced developmental literature, this strategy is extolled as 'politically smart', tactics of 'going with the grain', targeting 'low hanging fruits', or 'not rocking the boat' and so on.

Such an informal selection process results in the selection of individuals with low motivation in the committees. Often, they were found to be unaware of their memberships and even when they were aware, they were found to be ignorant of the committees' functions and their roles. These members remain inactive, rendering the committees dysfunctional as SA forums and allowing UP leaders to easily control and manipulate these forums. UP leaders do not always unilaterally control the process of monitoring development projects and reap material benefits. Influential citizen members of these committees, who have been selected based on the collusive relationship with the UP leaders, also get a share of the rents/privileges accrued through the manipulation of project spending and non-transparent management of social protection services.

The governance of the committees (particularly decision-making) tends to be monopolised by the UP representatives. As the evidence indicates, whenever there is a disagreement, for instance, regarding project listing, it is not resolved through deliberation and consensus, rather based on the opinion of the UP members.

Implementation process (project monitoring, procurement, service delivery) also tends to be dominated by the UP leaders, with Ward Councillors playing the key role in supervising or monitoring the process. Such domination and influence leave very little room for the citizen members to operate effectively in the committees. Consequently, various irregularities observed by the citizen members (such observations happen in a few cases) tend to remain unaddressed. In fact, some 'profitable' activities such as material procurement are deemed

by the UP leaders as 'no-go' areas for citizen members. The study has observed a few exceptions to this general pattern. In some UPs, elite citizen members did monitor the quality of construction work and asked UP Chairpersons and Councillors to take necessary measures to solve the identified problems.

Monopolisation of the decision-making process by the UP representatives in WC and SSC is not always an outcome of manipulative or coercive processes but can be intriguingly based on the consent of the citizen members, many of who tend to believe that the role of the committees is not to demand accountability of the UP leaders but to work jointly with them. Citizen members also tend to believe that the Chairperson and Ward Councillors are the best persons to do the listing of the projects and thus, their opinions may not be that significant or required.

The scenario of committee governance changes substantially in UPs where NGOs work with the committees as a part of citizen members' capacity and awareness building. For instance, when 'citizen forum'¹⁵ members were involved, the decision-making and implementation processes tended not to be dominated by the UP leaders, especially by the UP Chairperson, and there were fewer irregularities in the processes of beneficiary listing and monitoring the implementation of projects. In such cases, even citizen members were found to be active in the material procurement process.

¹⁵Citizen forum was introduced by *Journey for Advancement in Transparency, Representation and Accountability (JATRA)* project of CARE, Bangladesh which is a 23-member group of good governance champions nominated by marginalised communities through a participatory process.

A major problem that disempowers and marginalises citizen members in the committee governance process is their lack of knowledge about relevant rules, policies, and procedures. For instance, they are supposed to play the lead role in purchasing construction materials, hiring workers, and supervising project implementation. Evidence indicates,

general citizen members failed to carry out these responsibilities since they hardly possess the required technical knowledge. In areas where NGOs were active in building awareness and capacities of the members, they were then able to make the procurement process reasonably transparent.

Table 2: Summary findings of the Ward Committee

Union	UP category	Were citizen members chosen as per the prescribed rules?	Does meeting take place?	Who participated in the meeting (only WC members supposed to participate)		Who has finally prepared the priority list? (all seven members should participate)	Who dominated the deliberation process? (role of all members should be equal)	Was any item of the priority list finally incorporated in the budget?	Was it functional? (were the citizen members able to actively participate in the deliberation & decision-making process?)
				Citizen members	Others				
A	Non-NGO	No, UP Chairperson & Ward Councillor jointly selected Ward Committee members	Yes	Few citizen members	Ward Councillor, UP secretary, & UP Chairperson	UP Chairperson & Ward Councillor	UP Chairperson	Citizen members have no knowledge about it	No
B	Non-NGO	No, UP Chairperson selected Ward Committee members	Not regularly	Few citizen members	UP Chairperson Ward Councillor, & UP Secretary	UP Chairperson & Ward Councillor	UP Chairperson	Citizen members have no knowledge about it	No
C	No NGO intervention at present	Yes, but in some cases, Ward Councillors or UP Chairperson also interfere in the selection process	Yes	Few citizen members	UP Chairperson, Secretary, & social elites	Ward Councillor	UP Chairperson	Citizen members have no knowledge about it	No
D	No NGO intervention at present	Yes, but in some cases, Ward Councillors or UP Chairperson also interfere in the selection process	Yes	Few citizen members	UP Chairperson, UP Secretary, & Ward Councillor	Ward Councillor & UP Chairperson	UP Chairperson & Ward Councillor	Citizen members have no knowledge about it	No

[Table 2 contd....]

[... Table 2 contd]

Union	UP category	Were citizen members chosen as per the prescribed rules?	Does meeting take place?	Who participated in the meeting (only WC members supposed to participate)		Who has finally prepared the priority list? (all seven members should participate)	Who dominated the deliberation process? (role of all members should be equal)	Was any item of the priority list finally incorporated in the budget?	Was it functional? (were the citizen members able to actively participate in the deliberation & decision-making process?)
				Citizen members	Others				
E	NGO intervention	No, UP Chairperson & Ward Councillor jointly selected Ward Committee members	Not regularly	Few SSC members	UP Chairperson, Ward Councillor, & local elites	Ward Councillor & UP Chairperson	UP Chairperson	Citizen members have no knowledge about it	No
F	NGO intervention	Yes, but in some cases, Ward Councillors also interfere in the selection process	Yes	One or two SSC members	UP Chairperson, Ward Councillor, & political leaders	Ward Councillor	UP Chairperson	Citizen members have no knowledge about it	Partially effective
G	NGO intervention	Yes	Yes	Some WC members	UP Chairperson, Ward Councillor, & UP Secretary	The Committee & UP Chairperson	UP Chairperson	Yes	Effective
H	NGO intervention	Yes	Yes	Few citizen members	UP Chairperson, Ward Councillor, & UP Secretary	The Committee & UP Chairperson	UP Chairperson	Citizen members have no knowledge about it	Partially effective

Table 3: Summary findings of the Scheme Supervision Committee

Union	UP category	Were the citizen members chosen as per the prescribed rules?	Does meeting take place?	Who participated in the meeting (only SSC members supposed to participate)		Did citizen members actively participate in the decision-making process?	Who dominated the deliberation process?	Did SSC monitor any development project?	Did SSC raise any objection based on observation?
				SSC members	Non-SSC members				
A	Non-NGO	No, Ward Councillor selected members	Yes	A few SSC members	Ward Councillor, UP Secretary, & UP Chairperson	No information available	Ward Councillor	Yes	No
B	Non-NGO	No, Ward Councillor & UP Chairperson selected members	Yes	A few SSC members	UP Chairperson, Ward Councillor, & UP Secretary	No information available	UP Chairperson & Ward Councillors	No information available	No information available
C	No NGO intervention at present	Yes, but also UP Chairperson selected members	Yes	Only SSC Member Secretary	UP Chairperson	No information available	UP Chairperson & SSC Member Secretary	Yes	No
D	No NGO intervention at present	Yes	Yes	SSC members	UP Chairperson & UP Secretary	Not at all	UP Chairperson	Yes	No
E	NGO intervention	Yes	Yes	A few SSC members	UP Chairperson, Ward Councillor, & local elites	Marginally participated	UP Chairperson	Yes	Yes
F	NGO intervention	No, UP Chairperson selected members	Yes	A few SSC members	UP Chairperson, Ward Councillor, & political leaders	Somehow participated	UP Chairperson	Yes	No
G	NGO intervention	Yes	Yes	All SSC members	UP Chairperson, Ward Councillor, & UP Secretary	No (check the data)	UP Chairperson & Ward Councillor	Yes	No
H	NGO intervention	No, UP Chairperson & Ward Councillor interfere in the selection process	*Yes	A few SSC members	UP Chairperson, Ward Councillor, & UP Secretary	No	UP Chairperson & Ward Councillor	No information available	No information available

*Information based on the interview with UP Secretary

3.4 WARD SHOBHA AND OPEN BUDGET MEETING AS SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY FORUMS

The fourth case study examined the functioning of newly created deliberative spaces, *Shobha* and Open Budget Meeting (OBM) in the UPs as potentially effective tools for SA.¹⁶ (Key findings are summarised in Table 4 and Table 5.)

Poor citizens do perceive the *Shobha* as a deliberative forum—a legitimate and accessible platform for expressing and fulfilling their demands. This perception has been observed in UPs irrespective of state/NGO interventions. In contrast, OBM needs external interventions to enable poor citizens to actively participate and voice their demands. Local elites such as educated citizens and former government officials have also used these platforms to raise awareness of the UP leaders about local developmental projects needed; they particularly used these forums to seek allocations for infrastructure development of their UPs. Political leaders also use these as a strategically useful public gathering to conduct their political public relations exercises. Given such disparate uses, the study observes that *Shobhas* and OBMs tend to play a limited role in holding the

UP representatives accountable for their activities.

It is the responsibility of UP representatives to invite citizens to participate in these deliberative forums. Along with budget statements, UPs are required to present income and expenditure statements to citizens. Almost all UP officials (UP Chairpersons, Ward Councillors, and Secretaries), who were interviewed for this study, showed positive attitudes towards *Shobhas* and OBMs. In the UPs examined here, at least one budget meeting takes place every year. Although most of the Ward Councillors said that they liked the idea of *Shobha*, only two (UPs with NGO intervention) out of the eight studied UPs could manage to arrange the required number of Ward *Shobhas*—twice a year as per the law.

A major disincentive for UP leaders in organising *Shobhas* and OBMs is the substantial costs associated with these meetings; as the central government does not have any funding allocation for them, the costs fall on the UP leaders. In the UP Manual (2012), the Ministry of

¹⁶The Local Government Act, 2009 provided the necessary legal infrastructure for establishing these two deliberative forums, *Shobha* and OBM. These forums established community-based planning mechanisms at the Ward level of UPs for the first time in Bangladesh. According to the Act, each UP will form a Ward *Shobha* (a committee which will organise Ward level public meetings—*Shobhas*) in its nine Wards at least twice a year. A relevant Ward Councillor presides over the Ward *Shobha* while a female Ward Councillor from reserved seats acts as the Ward *Shobha* advisor. The UP must make public announcement at least seven days prior to the *Shobha* (the public meeting) where UP representatives will disclose information on current development activities, financial transactions, and schemes in front of the participants during these *Shobhas*. Furthermore, *Shobha* attendees can propose projects, prioritise schemes and development programmes, review UP reports, and identify shortcomings. The UP Act obliges UP members to consider *Shobha* decisions/recommendations as mandatory and these are not alterable. This is a formal institutional space where people can evaluate (in the next *Shobha*) whether previously agreed plans are subsequently incorporated in the UP's development plan for implementation or not.

OBMs are intended to make budget deliberations open and transparent so that UP representatives are not able to manipulate allocations for personal benefits or for the benefits of locally powerful elites. The Act, 2009 provides elaborate provisions for organising OBMs. After finalisation of a budget based on priorities identified at *Shobha* and relevant UP Standing Committee recommendations, the UP must have the budget approved in an OBM. This approval must take place at UP premises in the presence of UP voters before the beginning of the financial year. This requirement facilitates a clear and transparent accounting of public money, while also regulating waste and abuse of allocated funds.

Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives (LGRD) instructed the UPs to make provisions for organising OBMs in their own development budget but there is no such instruction for *Shobhas*. Central government's expectation that UPs are willing to or more importantly, are able to allocate funds from their own budget is clearly based on unrealistic assumptions given the meagre revenue of the UPs (a few UPs located in industrial or commercial areas are an exception) from local sources.¹⁷ Lack of a government-approved budget for these SA forums indicates that such a citizen engagement process is possibly of low priority to the central government.

Consequently, UP Chairpersons usually organise OBMs (they tend to have strong incentives to do OBMs, as discussed later) with their personal fund. In this case, the meeting is conducted at a smaller scale, with most participants coming from a close group—political allies, loyal clients. But they do not seem to be enthusiastic about doing the same with *Shobhas*.

Ward Councillors are formally responsible for organising *Shobhas* but lack financial means; so, they have strong disincentives towards following the rule. Consequently, *Shobhas* are usually held irregularly and even when organised, rules are rarely followed properly¹⁸ (e.g. *Shobhas* should be conducted separately in each Ward, large public meeting in an open space, prior announcement throughout

the Ward, etc.). They are usually carried out at a smaller scale and take place in a smaller space, such as someone's courtyard. In rare cases, wealthy Ward Councillors in charge organise larger *Shobhas*.

Findings reveal that *Shobhas* and OBMs were regularly held at UPs which are supported by NGO-led interventions. NGOs typically assisted these UPs with public announcements, festoon and leaflet distribution, and community outreach. These UPs also received financial and logistical supports from NGOs for arranging these events. As a result, the forums are regularly organised, attended by diverse, representative groups of citizens and collective needs are better articulated.

When UP Chairpersons take the initiative to organise OBMs with their private funds, which can be substantial at times, the dominant incentive tends to be politico-strategic—using the platform for mobilising votes or nurturing elite and clientelistic bases, building a future political career in national politics, etc. The financial support from NGOs makes the process easier for UP leaders and so, they tend to be very enthusiastic about NGO's involvement. Also, without NGO support UPs may not be able to organise these forums on a regular basis.

The *Shobha* Chairperson (relevant Ward Councillor) is formally responsible for presenting annual development reports to the attendees. But in reality, *Shobhas* are not conducted following the procedures dictated by the UP Act¹⁹. It is conducted in an ad hoc manner and UP leaders lack a proper understanding of their

¹⁷Rahman, Hossain, & Uddin, 2016; Ullah & Pongquan, 2010

As Rahman, Hossain, & Uddin (2016, p. ix) observed: "With their limited taxation authority the revenues UPs generate or are able to retain after transferring a major portion to the central government have also remained insignificant for decades."

¹⁸ An intriguing example of rule violation, as noted in the study, was organising a *Shobha* jointly by three adjacent Wards of a UP. The UP members were also able to show large gathering of citizens in such joint meetings.

¹⁹Ward Councillor will preside over the meeting (Article 5 (4)) and member of the reserved seat (female Councillor) will become the advisor of the meeting (Article 5 (5)) of UP Act, 2009.

roles and responsibilities in arranging and conducting the *Shobhas*. In reality, UP Chairpersons tend to monopolise the process, sidelining the role of other actors and damaging the participatory essence of this SA forum. In many cases, woman Ward Councillors (*Shobha* advisors) were found inactive; dominated by their male counterparts, they are not able to perform their formally stipulated roles.

UP Chairpersons are enthusiastic about conducting the OBMs and usually play the key role in it (for political-strategic reasons as discussed earlier).²⁰ They instruct UP secretaries to arrange the meetings, provide guidelines for preparing guest lists, and dictate Ward Councillors and UP Secretaries to invite participants mostly of their own choice only. In general, UP Chairpersons are in favour of inviting local elites and political leaders to the meeting and let them speak to the public. Local political leaders also have strong incentives to address participants of *Shobhas* and OBMs as part of their public relation exercises. They are also keen to use these forums to interact with their voters.

Such political incentives of UP leaders are also manifested in different kinds of invitation strategies used for *Shobhas* and OBMs. *Shobhas* are usually announced by loudspeakers. In addition, Ward Councillors and their followers invite their personal contacts. UPs also make loudspeaker announcements for OBMs. But in this case, special care is taken to ensure the participation of the local elites—politicians, teachers, traders, government officials—who receive formal invitations by UP Secretaries on behalf of the UP Chairpersons. They also personally invite selected people to attend

budget meetings. In contrast to *Shobhas*, UP Chairpersons and Ward Councillors pro-actively invite local elites and people of their choices to attend OBMs. In UPs, where NGOs are not involved, partisan selection of attendees is taken to the extreme whereby UP leaders will make sure that only their preferred people are present in the meetings.

Above discussion indicates that a major objective of UP leaders as well as of local political elites is to use these forums as a space for generating and maintaining political capital, consolidating elite and non-elite patronage network, and even kinship-based patronage network. Consequently, these forums considerably resemble the existing political dynamics and patron-client relationships at the local level. But some UP representatives also use these forums for obtaining information on constituent's problems and demands. In such cases, they have the incentive to invite people outside their narrow elite, kinship, and clientelistic bases. This incentive of the UP leadership allows poor citizens to participate and take advantage of these SA forums to articulate their demands and vent their grievances, empowering citizens and providing them formal institutional means for demanding direct accountability (using *rude accountability*²¹—a strategy occasionally adopted in this case by the citizens) from their elected representatives.

As discussed below, such political transactions between citizens and their representatives in these forums do not necessarily manifest a zero-sum game but a positive-sum game, to some extent, even though the leaders intend

²⁰Chairpersons also feel obligated to conduct OBMs since UNOs urge them to arrange these before sending the draft budget to them.

²¹As defined by Naomi Hossain "'rude' forms of accountability [is the] the informal pressures used by citizens to claim public services and to sanction service failures." (Hossain, 2010, p. 907). For Hossain rude can be quite literally impolite. For empirical account of rude accountability in the context of *Shobha*, see Hassan & Nazneen, 2013.

to monopolise the spaces for political benefits.

An implicit but critical objective of establishing *Shobha* and OBM was that such face-to-face interactions between UP leaders and citizens would generate relevant information (budget allocations, nature of projects and rationales for their selection, amount of resources available for safety-net programmes, eligibility criteria, responsibilities and obligations of UP leaders, etc.) and this would be made instantly public, which then becomes public good for the entire community, i.e. information will spread beyond the direct participants of the forums. Consequently, information asymmetry between representatives and citizens/community would be reduced, empowering citizens as the principal who could then exact accountability from the agents (UP leaders). Armed with the information, citizens would also become a competent negotiating actor in the deliberation process allowed by the new SA spaces.

This study did not find any evidence of such citizen empowerment. For instance, some OBM participants were found to be not even aware of the objectives and agendas of the meetings. Majority of the people interviewed—general citizens and OBM participants—did not have any knowledge of the incomes, expenditures, or budget of their respective UPs. Even some UP Ward Councillors lacked the knowledge of the objectives and agendas of the OBMs.

Prevailing social norms and political culture affect non-elite citizen participation in these deliberative forums. Some poor community members felt that it was impolite to ask questions to UP representatives in a formal *Shobha*. They are usually intimidated to ask questions about matters related to money. Moreover, since they did not receive any training on the budget process, they find it too technical. Poor and less educated attendees also have low self-esteem to speak at public gatherings. They feel that UP Chairpersons and Ward Councillors pay more attention to the opinions of the influential people. Unsurprisingly, many poor and less educated participants expected the rich and educated attendees to speak on their behalf. More intriguingly, they did not think that it is their right to hold UP leaders accountable.

Did NGOs involvement tend to improve this situation? This and various other studies found that NGO interventions brought some positive changes in the OBM process of UPs.²² Typically, NGO interventions create awareness among the citizens about their rights and motivate them to participate in deliberative forums to raise their demands and problems with the UP representatives. Poor men and women mobilised by NGOs were found to ask questions about services relevant to them—Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards, and allowances meant for

²²NGO interventions typically aim to include the marginalised people in the participatory planning and budgeting processes of the UPs to enhance the capacity of the UP functionaries and motivate them to organise public forums, in which poor citizens can pro-actively participate. The UP functionaries are given training on the budgeting process, how to effectively organise public forums, efficient collection of taxes, preparation of budget statement, record keeping procedure, etc.

widows, elderly people, and women with maternity-related needs. Poor men also requested for jobs from UP representatives provided under the 'Employment Guarantee Programme'.

As mentioned earlier, UP leaders have incentives to get information on and address the priority needs of the communities. But genuine and comprehensive needs of the people can be identified only if these forums are inclusive, allowing citizens across classes and genders to freely articulate their different needs. The study observed that NGO interventions have managed to make the forums more inclusive. Prominent demands raised in the forums included constructions and maintenance of small village roads, establishment of tube-wells, allocations of VGD and VGF cards, and construction of small culverts. Poor citizens particularly enquired about government-provided reliefs and funds. Clearly, in terms of demand-making, no single class can monopolise the forums.

Non-elite citizens pro-actively articulated their individual needs—for example, employment in the *40 Days Employment Generation Programme*, individual access to social safety net benefits (VGD, VGF, etc.), installation of tube-wells in individual households, etc. But they hardly showed any awareness or interest in monitoring UP-initiated development projects (formulation and selection of development schemes, for instance). Such queries, addressed to the UP leaders, tend to come from the elites who are educated and tend to be aware of UP's developmental policies and programmes. Even when non-elite citizens were explicitly offered the opportunities to express their opinions/observations on the development schemes chosen and being implemented by the UPs, they just continued raising

their individual demands. The study also found that poor citizens raise individual need-based demands in SA forums irrespective of NGO interventions.

One of the main tasks of deliberative forums is to provide space for the citizens to deliberate on issues related to public goods and the community's collective problems. Clearly, poor citizens did not see the forums' role in that way. Prevailing social norms and political culture seem to matter here. For instance, some poor members of the community felt that it was impolite to ask UP Chairpersons and members these questions in a formal *Shobha*. Moreover, since they did not receive any training on how the budget process actually works, they perceived it too technical for them. Poor and less educated attendees also have low self-esteem to speak at public gatherings. They also have the perception that UP Chairpersons and Ward Councillors heeded more to the opinions of the influential sections of the society. Unsurprisingly, many poor and less educated participants expected the rich and educated attendees to speak on behalf of the whole community. Also, since they found the process intimidating, they tend to avoid asking questions about how the money is allocated by the UP representatives and where it finally goes. More intriguingly, they did not think that it is their right to hold UP leaders accountable to them.

In contrast, local elites did take advantage of the government-supplied forums to articulate their concerns related to the community's general welfare. In OBMs, the local elites (retired government officials, school teachers, and businesspersons) pro-actively discussed various issues critical to their community, including the use of pesticide, quality of education and health services,

drug addiction, child marriage, dowry, and violence against women. Elites and political leaders asked UP representatives to allocate budget targeting the needy. They also demanded adequate budgetary allocations and pressured UP representatives to implement selected schemes as per the plan and the budget.

Political leaders also used these forums to extend their support to the UP leaders in implementing the development plans. The forums also contributed to making the service delivery process more transparent and equitable. Previously, UP Chairpersons and Ward Councillors used to distribute the benefits among their favoured people. With the introduction of these forums, citizens are now aware of the social protection programmes. They can also verify whether the deserving people are receiving these allowances and reliefs. Such increased transparency of UP governance process, especially the financial transactions, has benefitted the UP leaders as well since they could build the trust of the citizen, leading to positive-sum outcomes. This can be understood from the following observation of a UP Chairperson:



The public image of UP Chairpersons has been changed due to these Shobhas and OBMs. Now people know the budget, income-expenditure, and overall financial capacity of the UP. So, they now understand that UP Chairpersons and members are not thieves.

However, it must be reemphasised that the reason for such positive outcomes, as depicted above, is mostly due to the involvement of NGOs in nurturing citizen engagements with SA forums and these outcomes have only been observed in UPs where NGOs have been active. But the study also found that poor citizens do raise individual need-based demands in SA forums irrespective of NGO interventions. Such individualistic need-based demands include employment in temporary government programmes, such as *40 Days Employment Generation Programme*, individual access to social safety net benefits (VGD, VGF, etc.), installation of tube-wells in individual households, construction of *ghats* or landing for the ponds adjacent to individual households (perhaps a small scale quasi-public goods when benefiting a cluster of households).

Table 4: Summary findings of the Ward Shobha

UP category	Did Ward Shobha take place?	Twice a year as dictated by the law?	In each Ward separately?	Did Ward Shobha take the initiative to organise open Shobha as dictated by the law?	Nature of demand		Were women citizen participants pro-active in the Ward Shobha?	Could female Ward Councillors play their role as dictated by the law?	What were the roles of political elites?	Role of the UP Chairperson in Shobha as dictated by the law	Who played the most dominant role?	Were UP representatives responsive to the demands of the citizens (fulfil their electoral promises & the actual delivery of services)?
					Social elite	Non-elite						
Non-NGO Union	Yes	No	No	Yes, but after persuasion by UP Secretary	Social & infrastructure-related development	Social safety net-related services & cards	Yes	No	Delivered partisan political speech & upholding people's rights	No, UP Chairperson played a key role	UP Chairperson	Minimally responsive
No NGO intervention at present	Yes	No	Yes	Yes, but after persuasion by UP Chairperson, NGO, & Secretary	Social & infrastructure-related development	Social safety net-related services & cards	Yes	Yes, but only when the woman Councillor was from a general seat	Delivered partisan political speech & supported UP leaders for scheme selection and implementation	No, UP Chairperson played a key role	UP Chairperson	Minimally responsive
NGO intervention	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, but after persuasion by UP Chairperson	Social & infrastructure-related development	Social safety net-related services & cards	Yes	Yes, but not in all cases	Delivered partisan political speech & support UP leaders for distributing government resources	No, UP Chairperson played a key role	UP Chairperson	Relatively more responsive

Table 5: Summary findings of the Open Budget Meeting

UP category	Did OBM take place?	Whether OBM has taken place in the site (open place) as prescribed by the rule?	Why do UP Chairpersons arrange OBM regularly?	Did the participants reflect the wider section of the community?	Nature of topics discussed in the OBM			Was there adequate women participation?	Were women participants pro-active in the Ward Shobha?	Was this deliberative forum used as a political platform by the local politicians?	Were UP leaders responsive to the demands of the citizens (fulfill their electoral promises & the actual delivery of services)?
					Political elite	Social elite	Non-elite				
Non-NGO Union	Yes	No	To inform citizens about UP's activities & take suggestions from local elites	No	Resources allocation & assurance for development of UP	Social issues, other sources to raise revenue collection	Non-elite was not invited	Yes, but only elite	Yes	Yes	No information available
No NGO intervention at present	Yes	No	Being pressurised by the Upazila UNO office & to establish self-esteem	Yes	Partisan political speech & assurance for development of UP	Infrastructure-related development issues	Individual demand for safety net-related services & cards	Yes, but largely non-elite	Yes	Yes	Minimally responsive
NGO intervention	Yes	Yes, but not in every case	To establish a good and trustworthy relationship with voters	Yes	Project selection and scheme implementation, partisan political speech, & assurance for development of UP	Overall discussions on budget allocation & infrastructure-related development issues	Individual demand for safety net-related services & cards	Yes, but largely non-elite	Yes	Yes	Minimally responsive

4. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

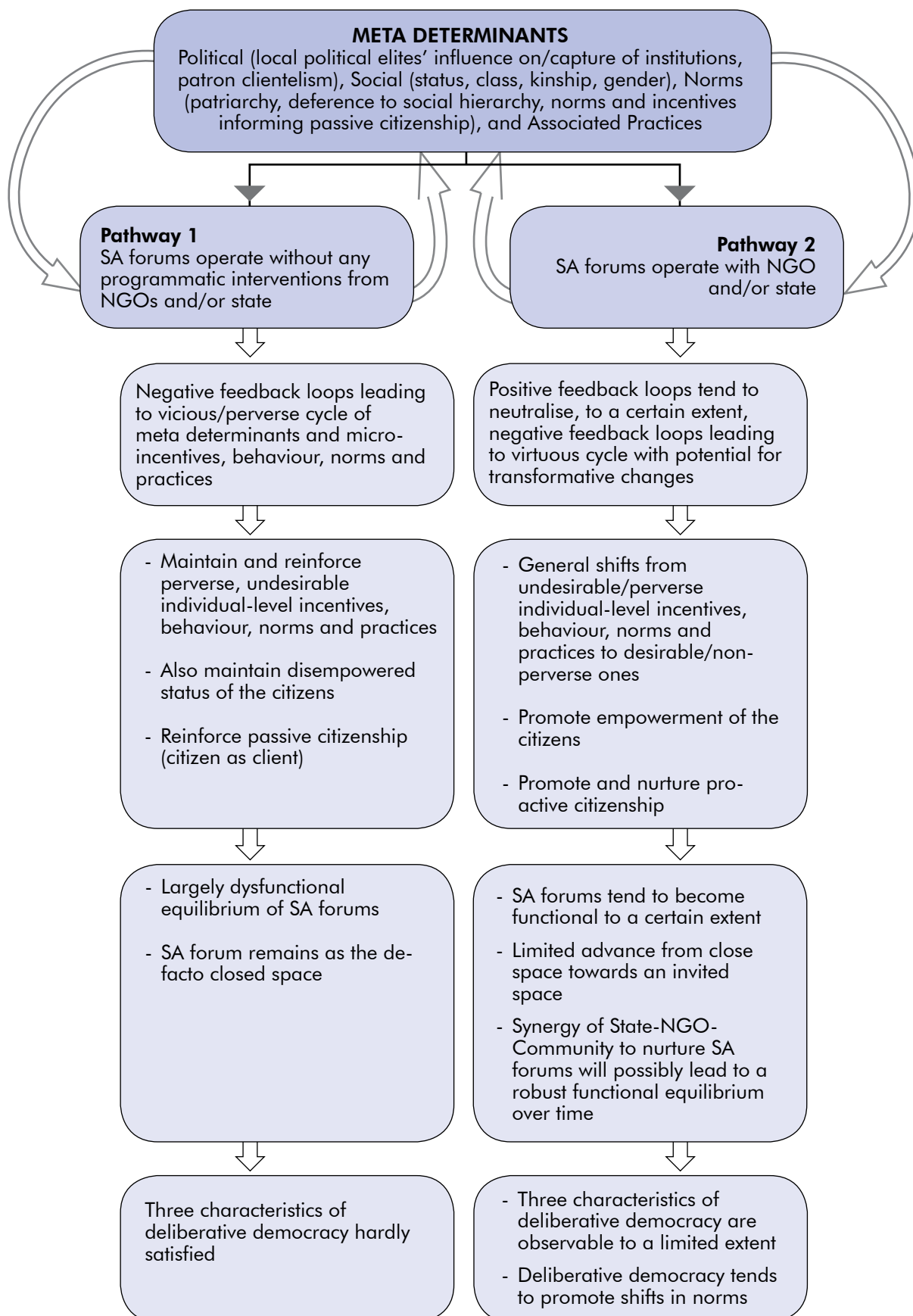
State-NGO-Community Synergy and Pathways for Transformative Changes in SA/Deliberative Spaces

As mentioned at the outset, the study attempts to answer whether the SA institutions/deliberative forums enhanced the capacity of ordinary citizens to provide inputs into decision-making and planning local development projects as well as efficiently monitor the service delivery processes; opened up spaces for citizens to effectively voice their grievances and concerns regarding the governance of service delivery institutions; enabled citizens to better articulate their felt needs and effectively deliberate or negotiate their demands with their representatives; and managed to entrench deliberative democracy at the local level.

The research found complex dynamics surrounding these areas of enquiry. We attempted to do a nuanced and granular analysis of these complexities—recursive relations between meta-level structural

determinants and individual agency, positive and negative feedback loops, transformations in incentives, norms and preferences of actors, and pathways of change. We hope that such analysis will enable a better appreciation of the governance problems and can help tease out relevant policy recommendations for designing efficient SA institutions/spaces. Such analysis will also benefit the development of strategies for engaging external agents such as state officials and NGOs to nudge these spaces towards normatively desirable directions— inclusive governance and efficient pro-poor development. Figure 3 provides graphic representations of the ensuing analysis that shows the two actual pathways: 1) the largely dysfunctional and normatively undesirable pathway and 2) the normatively desirable and functional pathway of SA spaces.

Figure 3: Actually existing pathways of the evolution of SA/deliberative forums



HOW FUNCTIONAL ARE THE SA AND DELIBERATIVE INSTITUTIONS/ FORUMS?

Apparently, SMCs have managed to remain somewhat functional without any support from external agencies. Its effectiveness, as a SA forum, is significantly affected by the workings of the meta-level dynamics of both local politics (sometimes even national) and sociology of the community. These dynamics have both negative and positive effects on the SMCs. Negative effects are manifested in the ways member selection process becomes vulnerable to political influences and is captured by a coterie of political elites.²³ Consequently, partisan consideration becomes dominant selection criteria, resulting in the inclusion of many less-educated and unqualified individuals in SMCs. Such control by a coterie also limits SMCs' independence and narrows down general members' manoeuvring space within the committee.

The meta-level dynamics also work as positive factors. SMC members who enjoy higher social status tend to be more motivated than others (due to social status-related incentives, as discussed earlier) and these individuals are found to be more capable of exacting accountability of the school teachers. This point is critical, since the study finds that in general, only two individuals—the president and the headteacher—essentially control the SMC. The balance of power between them turns out to be a significant factor in determining the SMC's capacity to effectively monitor quality.²⁴

²³Naomi Hossain (2010), citing several studies conducted during the last decade, also pointed out the influence by and capture of SMCs by the political elites. See also Lewis & Hossain, 2019.

²⁴For similar observation, see Hossain, Hassan, Rahman, Ali, & Islam, 2019; Hassan, 2008.

If the social status of the SMC president is higher than that of the headteacher, then the capability of SMCs to exact accountability of the school teachers also becomes stronger. Again, the downside of such social process is that it has made the SMC virtually a captive entity of the president²⁵ (near-monopolistic control in case of primary schools but oligopolistic control in case of secondary schools—since a few other elite members also show interest in school monitoring). Such individualistic control is, arguably, partly due to some kind machinations by powerful individuals to monopolise power, but we believe that it can be better explained by considering demand-side constraints—members' general reluctance to actively participate in SMCs (that leads to the de facto monopoly role of the president) to exact accountability of the school teachers, which they tend to believe is not their obligation or duty.

Discussions of the four cases indicate that except SMCs, the available formal SA spaces tend to remain largely dysfunctional unless they are activated and nurtured by the NGOs. But when these spaces are functioning, for whatever reasons, citizens of different classes and genders are found to be eager to aggressively seize the opportunity to voice their demands, whether individual-centred (popular with the poor) or collective (mainly raised by the educated rural elites).

Key reasons for the dysfunctionality of these SA institutions are linked to the strong incentives of the elected leaders of the local government to avoid accountability as often: their financial and other activities are not transparent;

²⁵Presidents of SMCs usually belong to the highest echelon of the social hierarchy of the local community.

they maintain mutually-beneficial links with elites, relatives, and supporters/followers using public resources; and they get involved in leakages of funds/materials related to development projects and social protection services, etc.

Beyond these, a major reason appears to be resource constraints. It is worth noting that the government has established SA institutions in UPs but did not allocate central funds for their operations. Currently, UP leaders use their own resources to organise SA forums (mostly OBMs since UP leaders have strong incentives to keep this operational, as discussed earlier). Given that political leaders and UP representatives are already prone to avoiding accountability, privately-funded SA forums are inevitably transformed into patronage machines for generating and maintaining political/social capital of the funders.

Thus, the processes of organising these forums significantly deviate from the formal rules (for instance, forums are not conducted in open public spaces, not appropriately announced, only favoured people are invited, etc.) and the forums tend to lose their mandates—ensuring accountability of the public service delivery.

On the demand side, such privatisation of SA forums also undermines formation of social capital and citizen empowerment in the local community and breeds cynicism among the local citizens about the usefulness of engaging with the public authority (citizens do meticulously calculate the socio-economic opportunity costs related to collective actions—time, resource, political risks, and risks of losing patronage/benefits as clients).

All the above factors discourage institutionalisation of SA and deliberative democracy to take roots.

HOW DOES NGO INVOLVEMENT CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS CREATING FUNCTIONAL SA AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS/FORUMS?

NGO funding of these SA forums and concomitant nurturing of pro-active citizenship (making community members aware of laws and procedures and their rights, how to deliberate in a public forum, etc.) can actually reset the dynamics of the SA away from the scenario described above—trends this and other studies have empirically documented.

Vested interests will certainly resist/manipulate any attempts by external agencies to neutralise such perverse dynamics, resulting in dysfunctional SA institutions. Hence, government endorsement will be necessary to counter such interests. State actors, however, hardly have the capability to *micro-monitor* local governance processes and here some astutely designed state-NGO collaboration mechanisms will need to be in place (this aspect will be further discussed below).

Interestingly, this study found that many UP leaders also welcome such NGO interventions because the robust form of SA forums, well-participated by aware and motivated citizens (so far only possible when NGOs are involved), tend to be *partially aligned with the leaders' incentives*. The benefits of UP leaders include: an opportunity to share real information related to budget constraints, status of service delivery and project implementation, etc., which can neutralise the negative perceptions about the leaders that citizens usually harbour—often based on rumours or ill-informed campaigns by political adversaries. Also, raucous forms of venting of grievances and frustrations by the citizens, termed

as rude accountability, can cool-off the tense and often hostile relations between the leaders and the citizens—a great incentive for the leaders since this can contribute to the maintenance and increase of votes. Moreover, the information supplied by the citizens in these forums, contributes to better decisions and planning. Finally, leaders are able to free-ride on NGO interventions (organising such widely-participated SA forums would be prohibitively costly for many UP leaders) to bolster their political and social networks.

Note that such robust forms of SA forums do not accrue benefits to leaders only but to citizens as well. Robust forums reduce information asymmetry—the difference in the amount and quality of information—between the principals (citizens) and agents (leaders), which has been a dominant barrier to holding the leaders accountable. Citizens may find some of their personal and collective grievances addressed/resolved or the benefits that they missed until then, both individual and collective, ensured by the forum. Functional deliberative democracy contributes to increasing citizens' sense of dignity as valued members of the community, boosting their morale and thus, contributing to the development of pro-active citizenship.²⁶

A male farmer remarked, “I could personally sit with UP Ward members and discuss beneficiary selection.” Similarly, a housewife was surprised to have her opinions taken seriously during the meeting proceedings.

²⁶As the chapter on the *Forums for Social Protection* in SoG 2018 report observed: “...members [of the forum], especially those from lower economic rungs, enjoyed the dignity...and the social prestige from membership in the platform.”

Beyond the positive impact on the accountability process, deliberative spaces also contribute to norm shifting (from negative types to positive ones) by making new information available to the participants. For example, marginal citizens, when empowered and trained, may no longer find it inappropriate or intimidating to ask questions about budget and expenditure to the UP leaders in an open forum. As noted by an expert on this subject: “The social norms we may come to discuss in collective deliberation are part of a rich web of beliefs, values, ideas, and scripts. Deliberation unearths such beliefs, values, and their connections. When deliberating, we may become aware of inconsistencies between our own beliefs or between our beliefs and the *new information*” (Cristina Bicchieri, 2017, p. 156, emphasis supplied).

Clearly, NGO intervention can transform the existing zero-sum game between the two actors (leaders and citizens) into a positive-sum game. With continuous NGO involvement, the new functional equilibrium can be sustained since such status quo tend to be incentive-compatible with all participating actors. But, NGO's involvement in the SA process inevitably raises the question of sustainability—an elephant in the room in development discourse. What will happen to the SA forums when NGOs leave?

Institutionalising a robust and effective SA process is certainly not easy, especially where the majority of the citizens are still non/semi-literate and poor with almost no experience of participating in SA or deliberative forums. Clearly, the current rural society of Bangladesh hardly offers a promising ground for the natural evolution of a ‘claimed space’ or ‘third

space'²⁷—a space claimed or created by the citizens themselves for ensuring their rights. The situation is further complicated by the informal governance (varied and complex forms of patron-clientelism) that underpin the resource distribution processes at the local level, the rough edges of which are also soothed by a robust form of the moral economy²⁸ thereby largely dampening any possibilities subaltern militancy.

In this context, transformative policy agenda of generating social capital and incentivising pro-active citizenship at the local community level perhaps cannot be accomplished by relying only on the community's own strength or 'self-governance'. This will also require external agents' interventions to supply necessary resources (knowledge, information, skills) for building collective action capacity of the local community. This means that a synergy of the local communities and external NGOs will be necessary to co-create social capital.

More importantly, the process also needs protection from the hostile local political interests through the *scaling up of social capital*—linking local community with the

relevant local administrative agencies, attaining endorsement of citizen engagement by the central government, and ensuring political/administrative/policy supports for SA initiatives.

The process is exemplified in the case of *Forums for Social Protection* (FSP)—a successful case of NGO intervention which has been examined in-depth in the report. Currently, in varied cases of SA institutions as well as in other governance initiatives, NGO interventions tend to be short-term project-oriented and typically when the intervention ends, citizens engagements falter and perverse incentives of the political or UP leaders remerge, and whatever social capital was formed in the community by the interventions deplete rapidly. The study has noticed this scenario in all relevant cases; the findings corroborate with other researches and project evaluations of NGOs over the years.

WHAT KIND OF SA SPACES TEND TO EMPOWER CITIZENS MORE THAN OTHERS?

Empirical evidence, in this regard, points towards *Shobha*. *Shobhas* usually have a large number of participants, cutting across classes and gender, and the deliberation process tends to be open and vibrant, making it relatively more difficult for elites to control or manipulate the SA space. These events often take place in sites close to the citizens of the Ward and during the appropriate time, making it convenient for poor men and especially women to participate. Absence of a fixed agenda means free-flow of discussion and deliberation not hamstrung by technical issues that require some education and previous knowledge and understanding of the issues discussed. Given these features,

²⁷ *Claimed space* refers to: "...spaces which are claimed by less powerful actors from or against the power holders, or created more autonomously by them" (Gaventa, 2006, p. 6). In *Third spaces* "...social actors reject hegemonic space and create spaces for themselves. These spaces range from ones created by social movements and community associations to those simply involving natural places where people gather to debate, discuss and resist, *outside of the institutionalised policy arenas*" (Gaventa, 2006, p. 6, emphasis supplied).

²⁸ For a mapping of multiple types of de facto SA practices informed by moral economy, see Hassan & Nazneen, 2013. For empirical accounts of moral obligations-based relationships between UP leaders and citizens, see Ahmed, Razzaque, & Rashid, 2016.

Shobhas tend to approximate the notion of an *invited space*.²⁹

In contrast, due to lack of these factors, SMC (primary schools), deliberative committees (WC and SSC) and OBM (this share only one feature with *Shobha*—somewhat large size of the participants) largely fail to ensure robust participation of the citizen members (in primary school-based SMC, WC, SSC) and of common citizens (in OBM). Consequently, these SA spaces become ineffective and in reality, *closed spaces*.³⁰

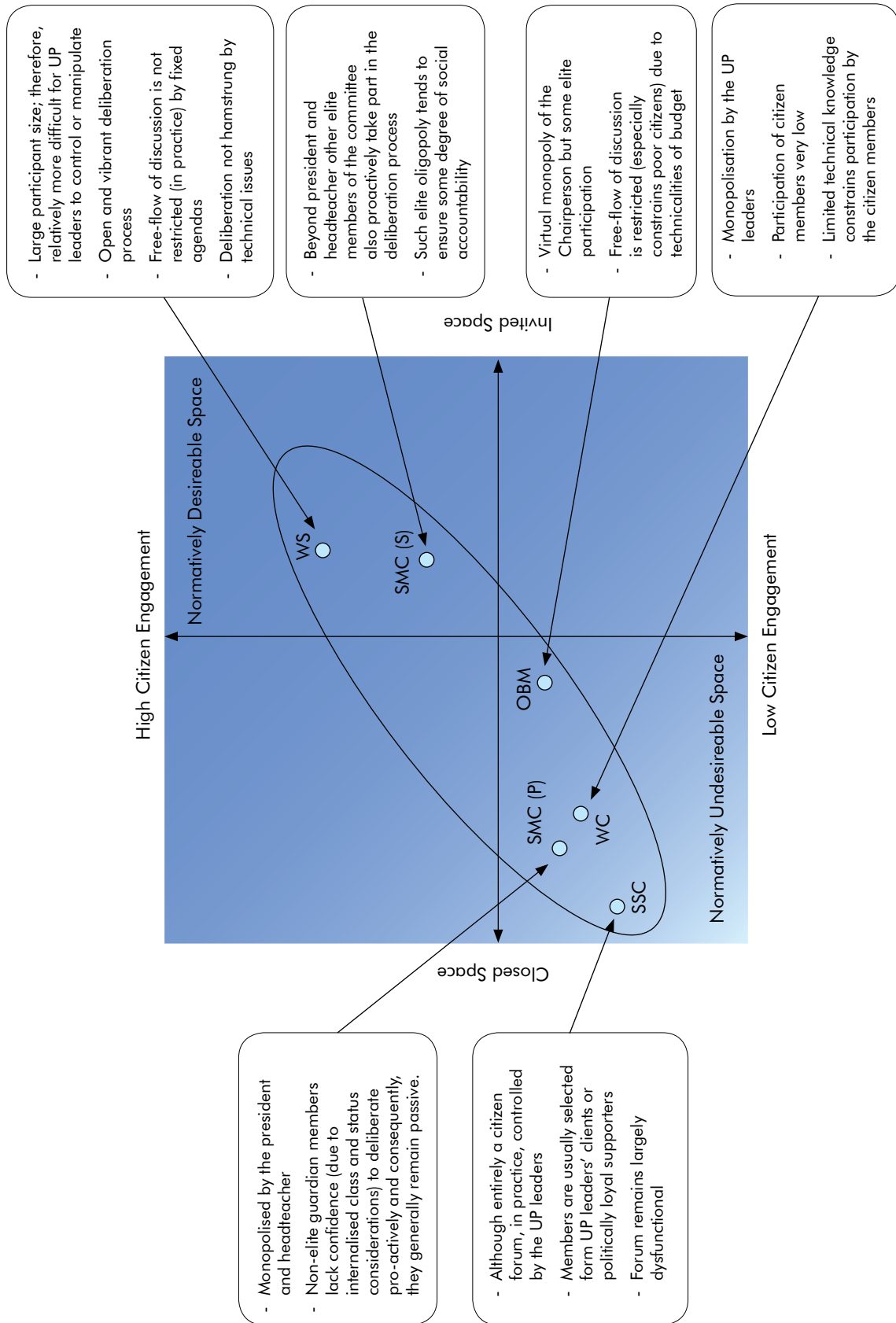
In secondary school-SMCs, other elite members of the committee are able to proactively take part in the deliberation process, so the space cannot be monopolised by the president and the headteacher. Consequently, the deliberative space tends to be characterised by the oligopoly of elites, ensuring some degree of social accountability.

The existing SA/deliberative spaces are graphically presented in Figure 4 below. (Boxes in the figure show the governance drivers at work in different SA forums.)

²⁹*Invited spaces* are “...those into which people (as users, citizens or beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities, be they government, supranational agencies, or non-governmental organisations” (Cornwall, 2002, p. 25). In our case, the invited spaces are formal-legal, i.e. formal by invitation (participation of the citizen offered by the state instead by a non-state actor) and formal by right (participation is legislated rather than ad hoc). See Gaventa, 2006 for a discussion on these concepts. Also note that mode of participation of citizens in invited spaces should be characterised by inclusiveness instead of being exclusionary due to the control by elites, either state or societal.

³⁰In *closed space* “...decisions are made by a set of actors behind closed doors, without any presence of broadening the boundaries for inclusion. Within the state, another way of conceiving these spaces is as ‘provided’ spaces in the sense that elites (be they bureaucrats, experts, or elected representatives) make decisions and provide services to ‘the people’, without the need for broader consultation or involvement” (Gaventa, 2006, p. 5).

Figure 4: The status of existing SA/deliberative space



It is true that all positive features of *Shobha* cannot be replicated in other forums but these SA forums can greatly overcome the knowledge barriers that handicap general/citizen members by providing them appropriate training, for example, on technical budgetary aspects of OBM—something that has been done in Bangladesh and many other developing countries.

HAVE THE DELIBERATIVE SPACES MANAGED TO ENTRENCH DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL?

As noted earlier, deliberative democracy can be entrenched when three vital conditions are met: absence of any *distorting meta-level factors*—coercion/manipulation/domination by the political/social elites; inclusive deliberative process; and most importantly, *consequential*—

deliberation process must bring results formally, formulation of new policies, laws, rules or at least by altering these, bring changes in the governance process as desired by the participating actors as well as informally, bringing changes in undesirable norms and informal governance processes. Our analysis indicates, minus NGO intervention (or support from frontline officials), the deliberative spaces can hardly satisfy these conditions. With NGO nurturing, the deliberative forums start getting closer to satisfying them. This means that left on its own, deliberative democracy has very little prospect to take roots in the existing formal deliberative spaces. The following Table 6 summarises our assessment of the status of deliberative democratic practice in the studied SA institutions.

Table 6: Have the deliberative spaces managed to entrench deliberative democracy at the local level?

Spaces	Distorting factors	Inclusiveness	Consequences
SMC (Primary) ³¹	High level of distortion In practice, processes such as meeting agenda-setting, member selection, fund management, monitoring teachers' performance and, monitoring development projects are usually controlled by the influential actors: SMC president, headteacher and area MP* (footnote)	Minimally inclusive	Hardly Consequential SMC guardian members feel that their opinions (related to teacher: tardiness, absenteeism, class performance) have very little impact on performance appraisal by the government
SMC (Secondary) ³²	Mid-level distortion Decisions related to meeting agenda-setting, member selection and, monitoring teachers' performance are effectively made by influential actors: SMC president, headteacher, and the MP	Relatively more inclusive but within elite actors	SMC members' opinions/decisions are relatively more consequential
Ward Shobha	Relatively more guardian members are usually engaged with fund management and monitoring development activities of the school Relatively low level of distortion UP representatives are unable to monopolise the development planning process but local political/social elites play some influence Non-elites get some degree of indirect representations since local political/social elites tend to advocate on behalf of the non-elites	Relatively more inclusive. NGO intervention ensures the participation of citizens beyond elite actors.	Citizen participants are not aware whether their demands were incorporated: first, in the priority list and then, in the budget as procedures dictate Chairperson and Ward Councilors exclusively prepare the final list of projects and incorporate them into the budget Consequential to a certain degree since some of the citizens' demands coming from the Shobha are included

[Table 6 contd....]

³¹Not subject to any NGO intervention

³²Not subject to any NGO intervention

[... Table 6 contd]

Spaces	Distorting factors	Inclusiveness	Consequences
Open Budget Meeting	<p>High level of distortion</p> <p>The process is dominated by UP Chairperson</p> <p>Management of the event (choice of the event site, selection of invitees, informing citizens) is controlled by UP Chairperson</p> <p>By intervening, NGOs can ensure relatively wider dissemination of the event and can make some citizens aware of the budgeting process</p>	<p>Minimally inclusive; deliberation process is effectively dominated by UP Chairperson and political/social elites</p> <p>Relatively more inclusive when non-elites are included due to intervention by NGOs</p>	<p>Minimally consequential since ultimately citizens' (mostly elites) demands/opinions are seldom incorporated in the budget</p>
Ward Committee	<p>High level of distortion</p> <p>The deliberation process and decisions (related to member selection, making development plan and preparing priority list for the budget) largely captured by UP Chairperson and Ward Councillors</p>	<p>Minimally inclusive</p> <p>Relatively more inclusive with NGO interventions, which enable citizens to be active in the committee</p>	<p>Minimally consequential</p> <p>Since, generally, UP Chairperson and Ward Councillors exclusively manage the entire process</p>
Scheme Supervision Committee	<p>High level of distortion</p> <p>The deliberation process and decisions (related to membership selection & project monitoring), in practice, largely captured by UP Chairperson and Ward Councillors</p> <p>Usually, SSC members are drawn from followers/clients of UP members and political elites</p> <p>NGOs' training of the citizen member tends to make relatively more aware of their roles in the committee</p>	<p>Minimally inclusive</p> <p>Since, in general, committee members are hardly involved in the project supervision process</p> <p>Becomes relatively more inclusive with NGO interventions, which enable citizens to be active in the committee</p>	<p>Hardly consequential</p> <p>SSCs are rarely functional</p>

Shifting such meta-level disempowering social norms (to accept existing social hierarchies, passive citizenship that disincentivise engagement in collective forums, demanding accountability of public representatives not considered as the right of citizens, patriarchal values that lead to marginalisation of women and gender insensitive designs of SA spaces, poor citizens' emphasis only on the private rather than public goods and various other norms that we have observed in the study)³³ is not an easy task although deliberative democratic spaces tend to facilitate and expedite such process.³⁴

But one thing can be asserted with confidence that any attempt to accomplish this task, through institutional interventions/reforms and robust citizen engagements, will definitely need some degree of synergy among state entities, NGOs, and local communities. Any future institutional reform or interventions in relation to SA institutions must consider this strategy for effectiveness.

³³Such norms can be explained as strategic/pragmatic and contingent rational behaviour of poor citizens, given the political sociology of the societal meta dynamics as well as dysfunctional state of the SA spaces they observe or experience. But, at the end, these norms are self-defeating and reinforce norm bearers' disempowerment and exclusion, and therefore, need to be discarded by the community. Such self-defeating norm was manifested in a recent incident at the UP level, as reported in a national daily: "Differently abled beneficiary Shahar Banu observed that Chairperson and other UP members distribute stipends and she is happy with whatever they give them [Taka one thousand was involuntarily taken out by the UP leaders from her and other beneficiaries]. She never protests since she apprehends that such protesting will end her receiving stipend altogether" Prothom Alo, 10 August 2019. Clearly some strategic norms result in zero-sum game.

³⁴Deliberative democracy has been identified as an efficient institutional tool to effect normative changes by scholars who study the process of shifting of norms. Collective discussions and deliberations have been found to be positively correlated to change in normative beliefs. The reasons for this have been noted by Cristina Bicchieri and Hugo Mercier, two leading scholars on the subject of norm shifting: "To abandon negative norms, we need to change people's empirical and normative expectations. Discussions and deliberations can be effective means to enact change, as they facilitate the creation of the new empirical and normative expectations that are central to a norm's existence." (Cristina Bicchieri & Hugo Mercier, p. 21, emphasis supplied). Such transformative potentials have been noted in the case of FSP intervention, which indicates possible shifts in disempowering norms due to the new and unexpected experiences of the participating citizen members. As presented as a quote earlier but worth repeating here, a male member was delighted to discover that he could personally sit with UP Ward members and discusses beneficiary selection and another member, a housewife, much to her surprise, found that her opinions are actually taken seriously during meeting proceedings. One can also add here the norm defying 'raucous' behaviour (or rude accountability) of the common people as manifested in the deliberation processes in some *Shobhas*.

5. SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutionalising a robust and effective SA process is certainly not easy, especially where the majority of the citizens are still non/semi-literate and marginal with almost no experience of participating in SA or deliberative forums. A sustainable solution, perhaps lies not in donor-funded short-term NGO projects, but in a permanent arrangement of state-NGO collaboration, in which the NGOs will nurture the citizen engagement process by applying all the strategies discussed above. A Politically smart and more sustainable developmental intervention would call for a synergy³⁵ of state-NGO-community to create a more robust form of social capital, institutionalising the SA process at the local level.

This will require external agents' interventions for building collective action capacity of the local community. Such interventions include training and awareness creation, for example, on 1) how to effectively engage in SA or deliberative forums, 2) objectives, rules, and procedures of the forums, and 3) technical issues (e.g. budgeting, project monitoring, and purchasing, etc.). It also requires facilitation of forum activities so that it is inclusive and participatory. State actors hardly have the capability to manage or micro-monitor these processes, and thus, will benefit from smartly-designed state-NGO collaboration mechanisms.

But, more importantly, the process needs protection from the hostile local political interests through: 1) linkage between the local community and relevant local administrative agencies, 2) endorsement of citizen engagement by the central government, and 3) political/

administrative/policy supports for SA initiatives.

The Government of Bangladesh has recently signalled its interest to such synergistic strategy by launching multi-year nation-wide experimental project—Citizen Engagement in Procurement Implementation. The institutional actors involved in this project are: Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) of IMED Division of the Ministry of Planning, BIGD (Brac University) and Community Empowerment Programme (Brac NGO) and site-specific citizen groups (direct beneficiaries) at the community level.

³⁵We are deliberately using the term synergy rather than collaboration/co-operation (essentially meaning joint effort) since the latter terms are unable to represent the idea we are trying to propose here. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, "synergy is the benefit that results when two or more agents work together to achieve something *either one couldn't have achieved on its own*. It's the concept of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts" [emphasis supplied].

State-NGO collaboration, as proposed, does not exclude the state's frontline officials' direct engagement with SA institutions/forums. Their role would be important to circumvent any possible attempts to subvert the SA institution/process by dominating local government leadership. As noted earlier, NGOs usually avoid addressing the governance issues, such as UP leaders' domination and monopolisation of the deliberative spaces and pursue their interventions by bypassing these politically-sensitive and challenging issues. In addition, if state officials participate in the SA forums,

UP leaders would be motivated to demonstrate more desirable behaviour,

for example, be more responsive to citizens' demands. All these trigger a *virtuous cycle*—officials' presence increased responsiveness of UP leaders that in turn motivate citizens to engage more in the SA forums.

Finally, regular funding allocation in the national budget will not only signal the government's strong commitment but also help to sustain the activities of the SA and deliberative institutions in a more effective and inclusive manner.

These strategies can help the nation get closer to achieving the goals of SDG 2030.

SDG goal 17.17: Encourage and promote public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships

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 **BIGD, Brac University**
SK Centre, GP, JA/4, Mohakhali, Dhaka 1212

 +88 02 5881 0306, 5881 0326

 info@bigd.bracu.ac.bd

 bigd.bracu.ac.bd