



FROM THE GRASSROOTS LEVEL TO THE NATIONAL STAGE: P4D ENGAGES CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IN NATIONAL DIALOGUES TO ENHANCE ACCOUNTABILITY AND DEMOCRATIC OWNERSHIP

National Dialogue on **Quality Education**

Chief Guest: Mr Khandker Anwarul Islam, Cabinet Secretary

Chairperson: Mr Md. Shamsul Arefin, Secretary, Coordination & Reforms, Cabinet Division

26 November 2022

Radisson Blu Dhaka Water Garden



Bangladesh has a strong history of activism and social movements; however, district and grassroots civil society organisations and individuals rarely have the opportunity to engage in policy discussions with national-level decision-makers. No country can have an open dialogue about national issues if participation is limited to the elite minority, which is why Platforms for Dialogue (P4D) has been working to change that.

Since the project's inception, P4D has been working to gradually build the capacity of civil society members and government officials at all levels of the administration to effectively engage in policy discussions. This will not only support Bangladesh's growth as a democratic nation, but it will ensure that voices and experiences from around the country are heard and recognised. From the beginning, P4D partnered with CSOs from 21 project districts to build their capacity and educate them on the key social accountability tools (SATs) so that they could not only understand basic civil rights to public services, information, or government integrity strategy, but they could also use these tools to advocate for their communities. P4D also worked with local government institutions to ensure public service providers understood the social accountability tools, their duties, and how to be more responsive to support citizens' needs with policy tools like the Right to Information (RTI), Citizen's Charters (CC), the Grievance Redress System (GRS), and the National Integrity Strategy (NIS).

P4D not only educated civil society organisations and their beneficiaries about these social accountability tools but also assisted them in engaging in meaningful dialogues on social accountability with local government. This prompted them to collaborate with local administrations to address major issues such as child marriage, the quality of public education, access to community clinics, and much more at the local level. Each community that partnered with P4D found meaningful ways to use the tools to advocate for their rights, be it by educating local citizens on safety net programmes or enabling citizens to feel empowered by filing a grievance using GRS.



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Partner CSOs implemented several social action projects (SAPs) with volunteer groups called Multi-Actor Partnerships (MAPs) to spread knowledge, support needy citizens, and build community around civic duty. This was just the first level of P4D's efforts.

P4D moved to the district level from the local level and formed twelve District Policy Forums (DPFs). This step in P4D's evolution created district-based groups that selected key thematic issues to address with their respective district-level government officials. P4D simultaneously engaged with several institutional partners like Bangladesh Public Administration Training Centre (BPATC), National Institute of Local Government (NILG), and Bangladesh Civil Service Administration Academy (BCSAA) to build the capacity of public servants like District Information Officers and District Administrators to support citizens and effectively respond to their requests. This stage of the project helped DPFs raise important issues to a larger audience and ensure transparency, accountability, and responsiveness from their responsible government officials. The conversations between DPF members and district-level officials helped raise awareness and catalysed much-needed action on stopping child marriage, providing quality education, and improving community clinics. From these district-level interventions came the formation of the National Thematic Forums (NTFs), where P4D's DPFs joined together to bring the three key thematic issues to the national stage.

In late October and November, P4D held three National Dialogue events, one on each of the key thematic issues: child marriage, community clinics, and quality education. These events, which from an outside perspective may seem relatively minor, were, in actuality, the culmination of years of capacity building, advocacy training, and community mobilisation. For the first time, local leaders from upazila and district-level civil society organisations working with P4D were brought together to present their concerns regarding these key issues to senior government officials from various ministries and divisions including the Cabinet Division, Ministry of Children and Women's Affairs, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, among others.



Head of Cooperation of the European Union in Bangladesh, Maurizio Cian, spoke about the EU's efforts to build a collaborative environment between civil society and government through P4D.



Active participation was a key element of the National Dialogue events from policy makers and civil society alike





Mr Khandker Anwarul Islam, Cabinet Secretary and the Chief Guest of the Quality Education and Community Clinic NDs, called on the EU and British Council to continue their support of development projects like P4D in the future.



National Dialogue on **Child Marriage**

Chief Guest: Md. Shamsul Arefin, Secretary, Coordination & Reforms, Cabinet Division

Special Guest: Md. Hasanuzzaman Kallol, Secretary, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs

Chairperson: Ms Sanjida Sobhan, ndc, Additional Secretary, Reforms Wing, Cabinet Division

20 October 2022
Radisson Blu Dhaka Water Garden

Each event began with opening speeches by special guests followed by a brief position paper presentation on the dialogue theme, on behalf of the NTFs, by BIDS (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies) researchers citing the primary problems, causes, and possible solutions. These presentations were followed by a stimulating discussion on the papers' findings, with participants sharing their opinions, asking questions, and seeking a deeper understanding. DPF Presidents from each participating district also shared their comments with the participants to provide a further local context of the issues in their communities. Policymakers enthusiastically engaged in dialogue as well, clarifying the root of the problems and offering additional solutions that could work at the national and district levels.

Not only did senior government officials, policymakers, and DPF Presidents have the opportunity to speak, but various NTF members were also invited to hold the microphone and share stories from their communities. This active participation demonstrated the impact of the NTFs' local work and helped participants understand how deeply these policy issues affect people's lives. Human impact stories highlight policy issues in a way that statistics and legal frameworks simply cannot, and sharing these stories on a national stage enabled decision-makers to think from a more human-centred approach.

The open dialogue and discussion proved to be very fruitful, with new ideas emerging from civil society members and policymakers. At each event, participants from all organisations and institutions showed enthusiastic support for the need to address these issues. Much consensus was reached in terms of both timing and action items that need to be pursued to achieve the main goals. The government was especially supportive of the NTFs' findings, and took ownership of the issues while remaining open to coordinating with civil society and the NTF members. Candid interaction between participants was encouraging to all, as everyone showed motivation and sincere interest in stopping child marriage, improving access to community clinics, and providing quality education to the children and youth of Bangladesh.



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Leaving the National Dialogues, most participants felt hopeful that the work they had completed to this point would lead to more opportunities to address each policy issue with specific actions in a coordinated manner between civil society and government bodies. While this remains to be seen, it is undeniable that NTF members and government officials alike are inspired to take further action to address these problems swiftly and thoroughly. Following the events, a reflection meeting among NTF members was held where they shared more feedback, impressions, and future plans. Some participants felt that local civil society leaders didn't have enough time to share their inputs, especially those who could only join online, however, most expressed satisfaction with the events' discussions. Many NTF members said that even though the collaboration with P4D may be coming to a close, their work is just beginning. Several DPFs have set up mechanisms to continue their work independently, and plan to remain involved in community development. If more National Dialogues take place in the future, with or without P4D's involvement, the vast majority of participants hope that they will last for longer than just one day, as addressing such complex issues requires more time and attention. Lastly, all participants appreciated having the opportunity to connect with national-level policy makers and begin to form working relationships with various government ministries and divisions.

Levelling the stage for civil society members from the upazila and district levels and national-level policymakers to join together and share ideas, experiences, and concerns on these major issues is a huge step forward in and of itself. Democracies must create opportunities like these where leaders from the grassroots to the national level can speak to each other in a respectful, honest, and constructive environment. The only way to improve on major policy issues like the ones discussed at the National Dialogues is by working together.

NTF members and key stakeholders met for the Preparatory Workshop for National Policy Dialogue events ahead of the National Dialogues in October and November



Md. Shamsul Arefin, Secretary, Coordination & Reforms, Cabinet Division joined all of the National Dialogue events as a keynote speaker and active participant. He has acted as a champion for P4D and continues to support the project's initiatives.

This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Platforms for Dialogue and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.



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