



Case study – Bangladesh

SCORE : Strengthening communities' Rights and Empowerment

Challenge



Poor Bangladeshi women have historically experienced considerable exclusion in participation and decision-making processes and official statistics indicate that gender discrimination remains widespread at all levels of government, its institutions and civil society at large. In order to balance disparities in gender dynamics in Bangladesh, women need to be empowered to act as equal partners in their own development rather than beneficiaries of external interventions.

In 2005 local governance and local government reform were very high on the domestic policy agenda in Bangladesh, tied to an ongoing debate over poverty-reduction strategies. The 2005 National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction listed “local governance” as one of eight strategic agenda points.

VSO Bangladesh identified in its situational analysis that the main underlying structural cause of poor governance is the lack of participation of poor and marginalised people in decision-making. Bringing together these strands – women and local governance – on a wide and long-lasting scale presented a significant challenge.

Catalyst

In March 2006 VSO Bangladesh initiated the Strengthening Communities' Rights and Empowerment (SCORE) project, funded primarily by the European Union. Its overall aim was to “Increase community participation in decision-making and ensure that poor people’s voices inform and influence government policy and practice at local level and national levels”, working in the Sathkhira, Bagerhat and Patuakali areas of south-west Bangladesh . The 4.8million people living in these areas, including many women, people with disabilities, landless people, marginalised communities and unemployed people, live in a disaster-prone area which had little community participation and empowerment

The best way to target communities was through Union Parishads, the smallest government units in the country. The accountability and transparency of these bodies was to be addressed, with a gender-based focus underlying all initiatives. The VSO project targeted 24 Union Parishads, establishing partnerships between them and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) which were to help establish good governance practice and provide a local link.

VSO volunteers delivered training to the Union Parishad representatives in gender rights, women’s rights, women and child welfare, volunteering, disaster management and climate change, raising their awareness and building their

capacity to incorporate these issues into their operations. Also, with a view to empowering the women already involved in governance, confidence-building and awareness-raising training was provided for them. Women were encouraged to be active participants in decision-making processes, and men were guided towards adapting their attitudes and practices towards women's involvement at both local and institutional level. The NGOs and CBOs also received training in gender mainstreaming. Citizen Communities were created at municipal and village level under the aegis of the SCORE project, helping develop a secure platform for the poor and marginalised members of the community to voice concerns and influence local policy plans.

Results

The SCORE project finished in 2011, after five years of EU-funded work with 24 Union Parishads and 15 local NGOs and CBOs. The changes were tangible, in the way that communities engaged with the Union Parishads, and through them had a voice in the policy and governance which affected their daily lives. The representativeness and accountability of Standing Committees of the Union Parishads was expanded to encompass, for example, women and child welfare. Open meetings were introduced for budget planning, announcements and reporting, and women and marginalised groups were especially encouraged to attend.

IDEAL, a CBO which works in 198 villages, was one of the groups to work with VSO during SCORE. During the 1990s they had been unable to recruit female staff, and found that they came up against many obstacles to women's participation, in a traditionally conservative part of Bangladesh. Based on the SCORE training they received, the organisation established a gender mainstreaming team, which implemented changes to address the issue. They now boast an almost 50:50 ratio of male to female employees. Within other CBOs in the region maternity and paternity leave has now been introduced for staff, the recruitment process is more gender-balanced, and gender disparities have been addressed in salary distribution.

The majority of the local and elected representatives who took part have expressed a change in attitudes towards rights-based approaches and pro-poor service delivery. 'Contacts have been increased between local elected bodies and community people' the Chairman of Santoshpur Union Parishad has said. Union Parishad Councils also reported more women taking roles of influence and responsibility in chairing committees for example, creating greater trust and enhancing status within the council and especially the eyes of men.

Change is achieved as a result of persistent efforts by initiators and participants, but progress is gradually made as people's ideas are influenced and they in turn bring about changes which benefit all members of their community.

August 2012

For more information on VSO's participation and governance advocacy programs, contact Charles Gay, VSO's participation and governance programme development adviser: Charles.gay@vso.org.uk

