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***Institutionalizing Community Based
Monitoring System: Lessons from LLPMS***

Muhammad Nazrul Islam

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Muhammad Nazrul Islam: Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development

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Muhammad Nazrul Islam¹

Abstract: *Local Level Poverty Monitoring System (LLPMS) a user-friendly poverty monitoring system at the grassroots level is experimented to fill information gap at the local level through involving local people as well as local government. The system got appreciation from different stakeholders for its user-friendly nature as well as its importance to local government for performing their activities in a coordinated manner. The Ward information Book, Ward Plan Book and computer-based database developed under this system were felt very essential for serving the poor and taking databased decision. Arrangements of resources according to their plan identified problems and existing flow of resources were given priority for implementing the plan. The new challenge is to make an inbuilt system of the local government so that it can use this continuously. For this, some training programmes, workshops need to be arranged and the database developed through using NRDB should be demonstrated in a wider way. For involving national government some more unions should be covered under the experiment and integration of the system with the resource delivery mechanism would be needed. Government and Non-government organisations working for strengthening the local government can be involved as partner organisations and some positive response has already been gained from the different organisations to this end.*

1. Introduction: Poverty is the overridden issue in third world countries like Bangladesh and for this reason the utmost priority of the policy planner is to reduce the poverty. Many efforts are undertaken for attacking the problem and Bangladesh has achieved positive results in fighting against poverty. The most successful areas of achievements are elimination of hunger, reducing maternal and child mortality, coverage of access to safe drinking water, promoting Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI), eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary enrolment and increasing enrolment rate in primary education. There are also some new challenges in the field of poverty such as ensuring nutrition diet, removing the sufferings of people living in some poverty stricken pocket, removing the problems of governance, ensuring quality education and arsenic mitigation in some areas etc.

¹ Joint Secretary to the government of Bangladesh and Director General, BARD. The opinion expressed in this article is author's own and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of any organisation.

Getting feedback on poverty situation over the years is a prerequisite for attacking the problem efficiently and poverty monitoring is getting momentum now-a-days. In Bangladesh, Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) is conducted by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) every four years to monitor the poverty situation at national level. The initiative helps to appreciate the problems of poverty at the nation level. However, there is a serious lacuna in relation to the timing of BBS survey and data quality and detailed definition should receive attention before these are used for monitoring (GOB; 2004). Recently, services to the poor have become a burning issue and decentralization is regarded as one of the effective ways for ensuring services to the poor. From the experience, it is observed that there is almost absence of information at the local level for serving the people at the grassroots level. The national level poverty monitoring system done at the national level emphasizes more on the output or impact indicator but the causal relationship of poverty is almost absent in this initiative. For this reason, community based poverty monitoring system is considered an essential element for filling the information gap at the local level and identifying the causal relation of poverty. This system monitors the poverty in a comprehensive manner and it has action part as information is used for plan formulation. It is the time to explore the possibility for making this system an inbuilt system to the local government.

2. Objective of the Article: The general objective of the article is to share the ideas for institutionalizing the system of community based poverty monitoring system on the basis of the experience gained by LLPMS. The specific objectives are as follows:

1. to share the background information of LLPMS;
2. to investigate the present institutional arrangements of poverty monitoring system with a view to feeding LLPMS;
3. to identify the nature of advocacy required at local and nation level for institutionalizing the LLPMS.

3. Methodology: The article is written on the basis of experiences gained by the author from his involvement in this project as Advisor and feedback gained from different stakeholders including the members of the research team. A consultation meeting was organised for getting feedback and the summary of the consultation meeting is articulated in this article.

4. Findings:

4.1. Background of LLPMS:

Local Level Poverty Monitoring System (LLPMS)- a user-friendly system of poverty monitoring at local level has been nurtured and developed in Bangladesh by utilizing the experience of Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) with the support from Community Based Poverty Monitoring System (CBMS) international network. The uniqueness of this system is ownership of information by its stakeholder as this system has an inbuilt system to involve local government and local people in information gathering, storing, processing, disseminating and using the information for plan formulation. This system has added some values over the traditional poverty monitoring system by providing more insights in a way of identifying area specific causes of poverty, involving non-professionals in poverty monitoring, reducing time in information generation, reducing process of data generation, and ensuring the use of information in plan formulation. The most important thing done under the LLPMS is developing a database at the Union level, which might be the ever first thing done under this project in Bangladesh. The database is helping the local government to take evidence-based decision and it would also fulfill the need of academicians and practitioners as this database can be used for benchmarking references. The Computer based database developed through this system by using Natural Resource Database (NRDB) in the mean time has received lot of appreciation and as it appears going to get its strong footing in poverty monitoring system in Bangladesh as well.

4.2. Outputs of LLPMS

There are several outputs under LLPMS and the major outputs are as follows:

4.2.1 Ward Information Book: Ward Information Book is prepared for every Ward by incorporating some aggregate information of Ward and some basic information of each household. Primary source of information was the main input of the Ward Information Book, which was collected by the trained people of local areas. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Household survey were conducted for generating the information. Partial tabulation was also done by the local people under the supervision of local government and research team of BARD.

4.2.2 Ward Plan Book: By analyzing the information incorporated in the Ward information Book and identifying sectoral problems, Ward Plan Book is prepared. The Ward plan is disseminated by organising Ward meeting in each Ward. Finally, a union plan is prepared by aggregating the Ward Plan Books and presented in front of the officials of service delivery agencies for getting need based support services.

4.2.3 Database : A database is developed for the whole union by using a computer software called Natural Resource Database (NRDB). This database is able to provide some basic information of each village, Ward, the Union and every household of the Union within a very short span of time. This database is proved to be very effective for taking decision although the technical know-how of developing as well as using this database is yet to be transferred.

4.3. Necessity of LLPMS: Voice from the Grassroots

Academicians have underscored the necessity of community-based poverty monitoring system but what is the impression of stakeholders, some impression are articulated below:

4.3.1 The rural people appreciated the process of LLPMS as they felt that for the first time they have been able to know the output of survey. In, their own words: *we are regularly providing information during different censuses but this is the first time we have been able to know our real situation from this initiative.*

4.3.2 The local government authority feels that the system would be helpful to appreciate the problem properly hence it would be helpful to identify the need based projects of the people. They also said that *identifying the beneficiaries under safety net programme is a very tedious job, as lot of people want to enroll their name in the beneficiaries list. Now the task would be easier as there is some basic information of each household.*

4.3.3 The service delivery agencies informed that the system would be able to deliver need based support services to the local government. As they expressed their feelings, *we don't have any information about the real situation of any Union so when we got any support from the government we try to allocate this support on the basis of number of people of the Union Parishad. There is a system of preparing Union Plan Book but it is hardly followed. If the system can be adopted*

in every Union of an Upazila, it would be helpful to give proper emphasis on the most deprived area.

4.3.4 The policy planners said that it would be helpful to ensure good governance of the Union Parishad. *If there is a plan of the Union Parishad and a system of evaluating the performance of the plan every year the functionaries of Union Parishad would be forced to be transparent in their works, and accountability of the functionaries of the Union Parishad would be ensured.*

4.4. Institutionalizing the System of LLPMS:

Some interrelated and interdependent sub system is essential for poverty monitoring these are identification of areas for information requirement from the perspective of stakeholder, identification of nature of information requirements, data collection, data processing, compare the indicators with the previous one and track the input and output. The challenging task is identification of indicators; for local level poverty monitoring the indicators should be short listed and simple in nature considering the need and capacity of local people. The information requirement also varies from one area to another. Some proxy indicators should be developed for adding more values in poverty monitoring system. From the experience of Bangladesh, it is observed that calculation of life expectancy at Birth is very difficult, but if we can monitor some indicators like infant mortality rate and maternal mortality rate, the objective to see the life expectancy at birth can be fulfilled.

The term institutionalizing is defined in many ways by the many scholars. For this article, institutionalizing refers to developing an inbuilt system of poverty monitoring with the local government activities and continuing this system over the years. For institutionalizing any system, some elements are required, that is, appreciating the necessity of the system, capacity to use this system, positive attitude to use the system, relevancy of the system etc. Different circulars provided by the government and functions of Union Parishad clearly mention the necessity of survey so there is no problem with the legislative power of the Union Parishad for doing this work and the necessity of the system is recognized. The problem lies with the capacity of the local government and resource flow of the Union Parishad to sustain this initiative. It is observed that there are field functionaries of different nation building departments posted at the Union level. If the Union Parishad coordinates the whole thing they can be used for this task. There might be direction needed from the line

offices for doing this work properly. It is also necessary to make use of the database mandatory for preparing any plan then the line office functionaries would be motivated and relevancy of the system would be appreciated. If the system can be integrated with the works of Union Parishad the quality of information would be developed in future.

4.5. Existing Institutional Mechanism of Poverty Monitoring and Feeding LLPMS

The poverty reduction strategy paper prepared by Bangladesh has underscored the necessity of setting up an institutional mechanism for poverty monitoring. The objective of Poverty monitoring is two-fold: one is information generation and another is tracking the progress to attain the goal. For tracking poverty as well as taking corrective measures several institutional mechanisms have been identified under PRSP. It has recommended forming a National PRSP Implementation Review Committee at the highest level for reviewing the progress on PRSP implementation. With a view to document preparation for progress review on PRSP implementation, a dedicated unit under the General Economic Division (GED) of the Planning Commission is suggested. Under the aegis of principal secretary, a technical committee is recommended to monitor the consistency of programme choice under the three years rolling plan. For information gathering, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) is provided with the responsibility to conduct HIES for monitoring the MDG attainment and poverty reduction. Along with the initiative of BBS, independent research institution and civil societies are also encouraged to undertake monitoring to offer necessary basis of comparisons and overall credibility of the monitoring of findings (GOB 2004).

	Institution	Tasks	Comment
01	National PRSP Implementation Review Committee	Progress Review of PRS implementation	Review will be on Annual Basis
02	A dedicated Unit at General Economic Division (GED)	Documenting progress review of PRS Implementation	Member of GED will supervise
03	Technical Committee (TC)	Monitoring Consistency of programme choice under Three Years Rolling Plan (TYRP)	Report of the TC will be sent to ECNEC before TYRP is finalised
04	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)	Information generation through HIES	Monitoring Outcome
05	Independent Research Intuitions, Civil Society	Annual Evaluation of poverty reduction and identify causal factors	Special studies and public dialogue

Source: Unlocking the Potentials

One may ask how to feed the LLPMS in the existing institutional framework of PRS monitoring. The LLPMS can play a complementary role with the initiative of BBS as it requires lot of time and lengthy process for finalizing the information generation. The conventional monitoring systems are concentrated more on the output rather than any implication indicator. But the LLPMS does not only generate information but also ensures the use of information in plan formulation. So, the LLPMS has potentiality for its action-oriented nature. If the local and national government are motivated it can be incorporated as a regular mechanism.

4.6. Involving Local and National Government

From the experience of LLPMS, it is clear that Local government at the grassroots level is very much interested in this type of works but the problem lies with the capacity of the local government. From our experience, it is clear that the local government can play a vital role in mobilizing the local people and coordinating the field works. But the limitation lies with their capacity of data gathering and information dissemination. The extension workers at the field level can be motivated or free time of the students after the public examination can be utilised.

For the sustainability of the process at the grassroots level, government directives in the form of gazette notification or circulation of circular is essential and persuading policy planners may be one of the strategies to get a strong footing in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has successfully developed the system covering one Union Parishad. If the coverage of areas can be expanded and the visible outcome of the system can be demonstrated, it would be easier to motivate the national government to incorporate the system as a regular process. Now the major challenge is to integrate the system with the service delivery. At the initial stage, efforts were mainly laid on assessing the capacity of local people and local government in data collection and data processing. A modest effort was also undertaken to use the information in plan preparation. But the problem was with the resource delivery, as the functionaries of Union Parishad don't have any idea about the nature of resource flow. Advocacy is required for supplying need-based resources along with other areas for developing an inbuilt system.

4.7. Advocacy Needed for Institutionalizing the LLPMS

4.7.1 Developing a sense of urgency to the local government: Local government specially the *Union Parishad* is the main user of the information generated through LLPMS. In that case the Local government functionaries should be demonstrated the usefulness of this system. Some training programme can be organized for the functionaries of selected Union Parishads to inform the urgency of LLPMS. The extension worker of different departments at Union level should also be trained. The Union Parishads are supposed to prepare a plan of action before finalizing the projects. But they are doing this work on a temporary basis as they don't have the idea about the need of the local area. If the database can be developed at the Union level, they would be able to prepare a pragmatic plan of action.

4.7.2 Creating a sense of ownership among the Upazila Officials: Resources are channelised through the local government by the Nation Building Departments. The service delivery agencies often face problem to deliver need based support services due to lack of information. Some orientation programme on the process and output of the LLPMS can ensure developing ownership of the Upazila Officials to the LLPMS.

4.7.3 Sensitizing the policy planners: If the policy planners are sensitized about the utility of the system it is very easy to institutionalize the system. Some more workshops could be organised at the local as well as national level for sensitizing the policy planners.

4.7.4 Exploring the potentiality of Partner Organizations: LLPMS is found to be very effective in knowing the real situation at the local level. But the full potential of this system is yet to be harness due lack of resources to implement the plan. In Bangladesh, lot of GOs and NGOs are working in the field of local government for strengthening their capacity by providing support services. If the LLPMS can be integrated with their system, the potentiality of LLPMS would be enormous. To this end it would be necessary to find out some partner organisations. Some training programmes can be organised to disseminate the technical and academic support. In that case, the clientele would be the policy planner and the field functionaries of partner organization. Then the

performance of LLPMS in terms of poverty reduction would be more visible and the it would be easier to chanelise need based support services.

4.7.5 Demonstrating the NRDB: Natural Resource Database has huge potential for its user-friendly nature. Bangladesh has successfully developed a database for the whole union by using NRDB and it has get some positive response from various quarters. For wider dissemination of the system, demonstration of the software is very essential. BARD has recently taken a step to demonstrate the database to the different stakeholders by incorporating this topic in major training courses. For influencing the policy planners some more demonstration is necessary. Some local people having computer literacy can be given training on the use of NRDB software for ensuring its proper use.

4.7.6 Involving Media Personnel: In recent year, electronic and print media have become a strong proponent for promoting good governance and strengthening local government in Bangladesh. Capitalizing on this common concern, the media personnel can be motivated in giving a regular coverage on LLPMS. A consultation meeting can be organized with the media personnel to this end.

4.8. Challenges for Institutionalizing the LLPMS:

Some prospective conflicts may hinder the potential use of LLPMS, which are as follows:

4.8.1 At present the projects are designed at the Union Parishad on an adhoc basis and if the LLPMS is institutionalized at the Union Parishad, the functionaries of local government will have very little scope to design project according to their choice. For this reason, the functionaries of local government are likely to make hindrances to adopting this system.

4.8.2 The local level policy planners may feel discomfort with the system if they feel that this system would reduce their capacity of power exercise. It is also true that it would take some time for getting its footing at the grassroots level.

4.9. Changes required in the system

Continuous development by incorporating feedback of different stakeholders should be an integral part of developing any system. Identification of indicators is a very tricky task because if the indicators are not consistent with the national level indicator, then the initiative is criticized by arguing its comparability. On the other hand, if the indicators are developed following the national definition then there is also

skepticism about the capacity of local people. From our experience, it can be suggested that the indicators should be developed in consultation with different stakeholders, and if possible, proxy indicators are to be developed which are very easy to collect and to disseminate. Potentiality of the field level extension agents or the students should be used may be involved for reducing the cost of data collection and data processing.

4.10. Future Plan for institutionalizing the system

Replicating the system all over the country is a challenging task and it is needed to show some visible development in terms of poverty reduction by using this system. For that reason, BARD is thinking to involve some partner organizations, which are involved in strengthening local government in future. If all Unions of an Upazila are covered under this project it would be helpful to motivate policy planners for replicating the system all over the country.

References:

GOB (2004) “Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction” Planning Commission, Dhaka.