



# Learning Social Accountability Together

Civil Society Facilitated South-South Cooperation  
in India, Bangladesh and Cambodia

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April 2014

# South-South Civil Society Cooperation: Democratising Municipal Governance in Asia

**Countries:** Bangladesh; Cambodia

**Time Period:** March 2011- March 2013

**Sector:** Local government institutions

**Actors:** PRIA (India); PRIP (Bangladesh); SILAKA (Cambodia); UNDEF

## Summary

Asian cities have been central drivers of Asia's economic growth in the last few decades. However, a democratic deficit in many small and medium size Asian cities means municipalities fail to deliver key service provisions to citizens, and civil society engagement in urban governance and institutions remains very limited. This case study outlines how partnership between civil society groups from India, Bangladesh and Cambodia have initiated organised civic engagement and municipal reforms in two of Asia's least developed countries through South-South Cooperation.

## Key Points

This case study follows the "Deepening Local Democratic Governance through Social Accountability in Asia" (DLDG-SAA) project, demonstrating the utility of civil society facilitated learning in initiating bottom-up governance reforms. The DLDG-SAA project was the result of a partnership between Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), an Indian CSO that has been working for decades on citizen participation in making urban governance institutions transparent and accountable, with support from the UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF), and two other Asian CSOs: PRIP Trust (Bangladesh) and SILAKA (Cambodia). The project was implemented between March 2011 and March 2013, and based in two sites: Rajshahi in Bangladesh and Takhmao in Cambodia.

The project aimed to target both demand and supply-side issues in democratic local governance:

- Demand side – supporting marginalised families and communities to realise their rights and entitlements, in order to engage with municipalities to demand more quality services.
- Supply side – capacity building for municipalities to become more responsive to the needs of marginalised families through institutionalising social accountability mechanisms.
- Building linkages – enhancing the capacity of local CSOs to promote democratic practices in municipalities, as well as with other practitioners of urban governance in Asia.

The project used a variety of strategies to address deficits in participation, transparency and accountability, including:

- Study tours to Indian provinces involving multi-stakeholder participants from both Bangladesh and Cambodia sites.

- Citizen mobilisation through formation of neighbourhood committees; training programs for citizens to develop skills on social accountability; city-wide campaigns including rallies, public hearings, pamphlets to educate citizens on social accountability mechanisms.
- Institutionalisation of a number of social accountability mechanisms
- Training programs
- Policy dialogues at both municipal and national levels

## **Key Results:**

- Enhanced citizen capacity: Neighbourhood committees have provided an effective space for citizen engagement. Greater responsiveness towards social accountability in municipalities. Municipal authorities in Cambodia and Bangladesh more receptive to social accountability tools, including citizen charters and grievance redressal tools.
- National and regional policy dialogues have consolidated experiences and lessons from the project to be disseminated through manuals, synthesis papers and other policy outputs.
- Several positive changes: DFID Bangladesh have partnered with government for a social accountability programme for CSOs, and World Bank has partnered with Cambodian government to initiate Social Accountability Framework in national programme to strengthen decentralisation. PRIP Trust and SILAKA have both contributed in designing these programmes.
- However, poor availability and quality of data at municipal levels, and administrative obstacles and approval procedures in Cambodia in particular hampered the project.
- Communication between partners depended on remote technologies that were not always reliable. Horizontal exchanges, due to resource constraints, were not feasible, and this was a major project weakness.

The case study demonstrates several insights onto how the principles of South-South Cooperation, as articulated in the Busan document, have been put into practice:

- Ownership of the projects was entirely under the CSOs PRIP Trust and SILAKA, and consulted at every key stage.
- The three CSO partners were committed to principles of transparency and accountability, in financial transactions and in project goals
- Inclusive development partnerships: PRIA's knowledge and skills allowed it to act as a credible knowledge partner without undermining the capacities of the other CSOs. Rapport between CSO partners and also municipal partners was built up through the study visits, enabling a strong development partnership.
- The DLDG-SAA project facilitated strong multi-stakeholder engagement, ensuring the involvement of elected representatives, municipal offices, academics, policy-makers and civil societies, creating joint learning opportunities at the local, national and regional levels.

# Learning Social Accountability Together: Civil Society Facilitated South-South Cooperation in India, Bangladesh and Cambodia

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## Introduction

Local governance institutions are taking root in Asia through a process of democratic decentralisation. These institutions are expected to deepen democratic practices, making local development inclusive, equitable and sustainable. This has coincided with an impressive economic growth trajectory in Asia largely fuelled by China, India, Indonesia and many other Asian countries. Asian cities have been the main propellers of this economic growth, and in order to sustain these economic gains it will be imperative to appreciate how these Asian cities are governed. Paradoxically, however, a large number of Asian cities particularly the small and medium size cities suffer from multiple deficits in democratic governance, resulting in citizen exclusion and inequality. In many such cities there is often an acute shortage of service provisions. Often, municipalities as one of the main service providers do not have the necessary resources, technical and human capacities. The decision making processes within the municipalities are often not transparent to the citizens. As citizens do not have adequate opportunity and space to participate in decision making processes, the accountability of municipalities to citizens often obscure and limited. Unlike rural areas, the history of civil society engagement in urban governance is limited, due to insufficient knowledge and skills in civil societies means citizen mobilisation for demanding transparency and accountability from municipalities.

Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a civil society organisation, has been working on citizen participation in making urban governance institutions transparent and accountable in

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<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges the contributions of Rajesh Tandon, President, PRIA and Shreya Maria Kuruvilla, Programme Officer, PRIA.

India for several decades. It has supported the most marginalised communities to realise their rights and entitlements; but it has also provided capacity building support to municipalities to become more responsive to their needs. This case study illustrates how an Indian civil society organisation (CSO), based on experience gained from India, in partnership with CSOs from Bangladesh and Cambodia initiated organised civic engagement and municipal reforms in two of Asia's least developed countries through South-South Cooperation.

There has been a resurgent discourse on South-South Cooperation (SSC) in international development. The policy-makers, practitioners, academics and think-tanks, both in the south and north, have been exploring the emerging modalities, practices and principles of SSC, building on what was acknowledged in the 4<sup>th</sup> High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness held in Busan, Korea in 2011. These explorations, however, focus primarily on official development cooperation between southern governments. This leaves a serious gap in lessons learned through several decades of SSC practices promoted and nurtured by the CSOs from southern countries. This case study contributes to bridging this knowledge gap, demonstrating how civil society facilitated learning could initiate important innovative governance reforms with a bottom-up approach.

## **Setting the stage**

PRIA with support from the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) and in partnership with two CSOs – PRIP Trust in Bangladesh and SILAKA in Cambodia – implemented the project “Deepening Local Democratic Governance through Social Accountability in Asia (DLDG-SAA)” in two cities - Rajshahi in Bangladesh and Takhmao in Cambodia. The project, implemented between March 2011 and March 2013, aimed to (a) enhance capacities of marginalised families to engage in regular, sustained and constructive dialogues with municipalities through monitoring and demanding quality services; (b) enhance capacities of municipalities to institutionalise social accountability mechanisms and to include the needs of marginalised families in planning and decision making; (c) enhance capacities of local CSOs to promote democratic practices in municipalities, (d) inform policies and programmes based on lessons learned from the project, particularly in relation to social accountability and citizen participation in municipalities, and (e) enhance linkages with practitioners of urban governance in Asia

The project objectives were conceived with a shared analysis of democratic governance deficits in municipalities in India, Bangladesh and Cambodia as described in the foregoing section. In all three countries the legal environment provided varied degrees of space and opportunity for participation, transparency and accountability of municipalities. As India was one of the pioneering countries in Asia in initiating constitutional reforms to introduce democratic decentralisation in 1993, the practice of social accountability and citizen participation is more advanced compared to two other countries. Democratic decentralisation in Bangladesh and Cambodia gained impetus through the City Corporation Act and City Corporation Rule, 2009 and the Organic Law, 2008, respectively. However, these legal provisions in both the countries did not deem citizen participation as one of the important tenets of democratic local governance.

PRIA chose to partner with PRIP Trust in Bangladesh as these two CSOs had a working relationship since early nineties. Both the organisations have jointly provided institutional and human capacity development support to a large number of grassroots CSOs in other South Asian countries. The relationship between PRIA and SILAKA has grown over the years as both the organisations partnered in providing capacity building support to Cambodian CSOs on social accountability and citizen participation in democratic local governance, since 2008. These opportunities helped in developing mutual trust and respect among the leadership of these organisations which provided an impetus for deepening partnership through the implementation of DLDG-SAA project in Bangladesh and Cambodia.

## **Key strategies and activities of DLDG-SAA**

The project used a combination of strategies to address various deficits in democratic practices particularly participation, transparency and accountability, due to which municipalities often fail to deliver services effectively and equitably and lack responsiveness towards the most marginalised. In order to enhance organised civic action, participation and accountability, it used citizen mobilisation, campaigns, capacity building, and participatory monitoring. It established models of social accountability mechanisms like citizen charters, pro-active information disclosure, and grievance redressal mechanisms in partnership with municipalities so as to enhance citizens' access to information and basic services. Having gained lessons from these interventions at the municipal level coupled with specific policy analysis at the sub-national and national levels, it organised policy dialogues and policy oriented capacity building processes with the policy makers towards policy changes. It organised training, exposure visits, on-site hand holding support and developed partnership with local civil societies to enhance their capacities for sustained engagement with policy making institutions on participation, social accountability and urban governance issues. The following key activities helped in implementing the strategies and achieving the objectives.

## **Context analysis including baseline surveys**

At the conception of project PRIP Trust and SILAKA undertook a preliminary context analysis in respective countries with necessary guidance from PRIA. This analysis primarily focussed on the national laws, policies and programmes that supported or hindered citizen participation and accountability in municipalities. Once the project was approved by UNDEF, detailed assessments of the existing functioning and governance issues of the municipalities, practice of accountability mechanisms, and available spaces for citizen participation were undertaken in Rajshahi and Takhmao municipalities. Relevant data was collected at the national level and a baseline report was prepared in Bangladesh and Cambodia. Based on similar experiences from Indian cities, PRIA provided support to PRIP Trust and SILAKA in designing the study and guided the interactions with various stakeholders. The assessment study was also designed to facilitate interactions with critical stakeholders at the city and national levels so as to ensure their participation and cooperation at the subsequent stages of the project. Despite paucity of data at the municipality level particularly on municipal services, the mayor/governor, councillors and officials extended their support. The officials from the national ministries were also contacted during the assessment study. A preliminary mapping of civil society actors helped in designing the interventions on the demand side.

## **Developing a shared perspective**

The previous working relationships between PRIA, PRIP Trust and SILAKA allowed them to develop a shared perspective on the roles of civil society in promoting participatory governance. The current project required had to reinforce this shared understanding, but also to develop shared commitments and perspectives among the project staff involved from various organisations. Many social accountability interventions and approaches proposed in the project were also new to PRIP Trust and SILAKA. A Training of Trainers (TOT) with facilitators and resource persons from PRIA was organised in each country involving the leadership and project staff of the partner organisations as well as some selected local CSOs. The objectives of the TOTs were to develop a clear understanding about the project among all the project partners; to enhance knowledge and skills on the application of social accountability mechanisms in urban governance; and to clarify and plan the roles and responsibilities of various project partners. These TOTs helped in developing a shared understanding on the dynamics of urban governance, how the existing spaces for citizen participation could be used effectively, the basics of specific social accountability tools like citizen report card, citizen charter, grievance redressal system, pro-active information disclosure, and citizen monitoring. It also discussed various capacity building and interface strategies for citizen groups as well as municipal officials. PRIA's prior experience of implementing similar projects in India was immensely helpful to the partner CSOs.

The effort to develop a shared perspective among the three partners was not confined to one-off training. The project teams from all three partner organisations agreed to meet through online video conferences every fortnight initially and then once in a month. This became a ritual and provided a cost-effective way of communicating and discussing the emerging issues. This was also the platform through which the colleagues from PRIP Trust and SILAKA learned from each other.

## **Multi-stakeholder capacity development**

The initiative was designed with a perspective that learning and practicing new mechanisms for participation, transparency and accountability needs to take place both with the citizens and civil societies (demand side) as well as with the municipal councillors and officials (supply side) in order to accelerate municipal governance reforms. A number of interventions helped in facilitating joint learning amongst various stakeholders. Two study tours were organised in India for a 10-member multi-stakeholder team comprising of the mayor/governor, selected councillors, representatives from civil society and media from each country. The Bangladesh team visited Jaipur and Ajmer in Rajasthan and the Cambodia team visited Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. PRIA has been working with the municipalities in all of these Indian cities on institutionalising social accountability mechanisms. The purpose of the study visits was to provide the participants with in-depth knowledge and understanding on social accountability mechanisms, and how they can be successfully adapted and implemented in respective municipalities. The aim was to facilitate a healthy and productive interaction between the groups and the respective officials on the opportunities, challenges and dynamics of institutionalising social accountability. The study visits also provided opportunity for each country team to bond as they started not only reflecting on their situations back home but also on how these could be improved by implementing some of the lessons learned from the Indian municipalities. On their, return both the teams prepared reports and shared them with the respective municipal authorities. The teams also shared



their learnings and experiences with other stakeholders in different ways. For example, the media persons from the team wrote media briefs about their learnings and how some of them can be adopted in their own cities. A strong bond developed during the study visit, which helped various actors to work together at later stages of the project, as the project team experienced greater cooperation and support from the municipal authorities.

Prior to the study visits, a series of dialogues and meetings were facilitated by each CSO partner with municipal authorities about the importance of initiating these kinds of endeavours. These dialogues and discussions with municipal authorities were conducted on a regular basis during the course of the project. In addition, a number of structured trainings were also conducted for the municipal officials and councillors. These trainings proved to be beneficial for both the partner CSOs as well as the municipal authorities. On one hand, the officials and councillors were sensitised towards the needs and importance of an accountable municipal governance system and on the other these trainings facilitated the process of rapport building with the respective authorities. It also helped CSOs to understand the challenges and limitations that these officials and councillors encounter while executing their responsibilities. There were huge gaps in capacity at the local level and most of the officials and councillors were not aware of the concepts of social accountability. The trainings helped demystify such concepts and the participants were able to anchor such processes at a later stage. Such interactions with the municipal officials also helped in breaking the ice and initiating the process of meaningful dialogue between the civil society and municipal authorities. PRIP Trust and SILAKA, both being credible training and capacity building organisations, were quite confident in facilitating all the city level interactions and trainings with the municipal authorities, PRIA's role was to provide support in designing the content, preparing relevant learning materials and sharing of best practices from India and other Asian countries. This division of responsibilities worked out to be quite fruitful as those learning materials were then adapted and contextualised by PRIP Trust and SILAKA.

### **Mobilisation and capacity development of communities**

A major objective of the intervention was to mobilise citizens' participation to demand accountability from municipal authorities. However, there were huge capacity gaps as a result of the lack of history of citizen engagements with municipalities in both the countries. A three-pronged strategy was planned: organising citizens through the formation of Neighbourhood Committees; scaling up city-wide citizen mobilisation through campaigns; and providing training to citizens for developing skills on social accountability tools and facilitating interface dialogues with the municipal authorities. All these interventions were carried out by PRIP Trust and SILAKA and PRIA's role was to provide guidance in designing activities and monitoring their impacts.

A total of 24 structured trainings were facilitated by the CSO partners for more than 1000 citizens in two countries, of which majority were women and youth from the most marginalised sectors. Based on capacity needs assessments, citizen leadership development, governance roles and responsibilities of municipalities, communication, advocacy and citizen monitoring of municipal services were discussed in these trainings. A number of refresher trainings were also organised, in order to ensure that citizens get a better hold on all these knowledge and skills.



Neighbourhood Committees were formed in each city. Emphasis was put on the inclusion of youth, women and marginalised groups. In Bangladesh, the committees were named as *Parshi Dals*, each with an executive body with the President, Secretary and Treasurer who were elected by the members of *Parshi Dal*. In Cambodia, citizen representatives worked towards mobilising the citizens and assisting in the formation of Neighbourhood Committees. In Takhmao, initially the formation of these Neighbourhood Committees was a challenge as it had never been done before and it took some time in mobilising citizens to come together. However, once the Committees were formed, they started to identify key issues from their areas and discussed them with the local councillors. At a later stage these Neighbourhood Committees in both the countries monitored municipal services every month and organised interface meetings with the municipal authorities.

City-wide campaigns were organised which were jointly designed by the CSOs, citizens groups and municipal authorities to ensure their ownership since the very beginning. Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials were prepared in Khmer and Bangla which were distributed during the campaigns. This included booklets and pamphlets on the governance roles and responsibilities of municipalities and the findings of citizen report cards (Citizen Voices). Social accountability mechanisms like citizen charters, grievance redressal systems and information disclosure formats were shared with the citizens through posters and notice boards put up at prominent locations in the city. As a part of the campaign, discussions and public hearings were conducted where citizens directly interacted with the municipal councillors and officials. In Bangladesh, *Gamvira* (a form of popular street play) shows carrying messages about the roles of municipalities and citizens and the purpose of social accountability were organised in the campaigns. In Cambodia on the other hand, rallies were organised where citizens walked through the streets with placards and banners.

### **Application of social accountability tools**

The project intended to design, implement and institutionalise a number of social accountability mechanisms with participation from citizens and municipal authorities. City-wide Citizens' Report on urban basic services focusing on water supply and sanitation services was prepared; mechanisms such as citizen charters, grievance redressal systems and pro-active information disclosure were also co-designed and implemented with the municipalities. PRIA's prior knowledge and experience from Indian cities like Varanasi, Raipur, Jaipur, Ranchi and Patna was considerably useful in assisting PRIP Trust and SILAKA to design and pilot these social accountability tools.

The methodology and sample for Citizen Report Cards were designed by PRIA in consultation with the CSO partners. A standardised questionnaire prepared and used by PRIA earlier in Indian cities was contextualised and reworked by the partners. In Bangladesh, 300 households representing different income groups, ethnic minorities, socially excluded, slums dwellers etc. from 27 wards of Rajshahi were surveyed. Similarly in Cambodia 305 households from 6 sangkats representing different income groups were surveyed. This gave a comparative picture of status and differential access to services according to different income groups in both the cities. The information collected through surveys was verified with the citizens, before sharing it with wider audiences. After taking feedback from citizens and authorities the reports were finalised and the sharing workshops

were organised with multiple stakeholders. Service improvement plans were prepared in each city through a series of follow-up meetings and these plans were monitored by the Neighbourhood Committees.

A model citizen charter was developed and piloted in partnership with the municipalities in each city. In Rajshahi, the municipality already had a draft citizen charter which was reviewed and shared with the citizens. Based on the findings of citizen report, campaign reports, Neighbourhood Committees reports and extensive consultations with other citizens and municipalities, the citizen charter was finalised. In Takhmao, SILAKA facilitated the formation of a Social Accountability Facilitation Committee (SAFC) comprised of officials from different divisions within the Takhmao municipality and the sangkat councillors. This committee after a round of meetings and dialogues finalised the charter on water and sanitation services. Once the charter was prepared in Takhmao, it was shared widely with the citizens for their use. Similarly in Rajshahi, the critical points of the charter were extracted and shared with the citizens in monthly meetings. Citizens in both locations found this information useful.

In each city, a model information disclosure was prepared and disseminated to citizens and shared with the municipal councillors and officials. A review of existing information disclosure formats and mechanisms was undertaken in both countries. In Bangladesh, the existing Right to Information Act (2009) constitutionally mandated the municipalities to disclose critical information to the citizens, however, there was no such law in Cambodia. Based on the findings of the citizen report and the monthly meetings of Neighbourhood Committees, the information needs of citizens were assessed and communicated to the municipal authorities. Based on the needs of citizens and taking support from the existing guidelines on information disclosure, the formats were developed. Once these formats were prepared, they were shared with the municipal authorities. Relevant information needed for filling the formats was gathered from the concerned departments and thus a consolidated information disclosure format was prepared. The information disclosure formats were also shared with citizens and Neighbourhood Committee members to take their feedback. In Bangladesh, critical information was displayed through notice boards at strategic locations and in Cambodia, the information disclosure formats were disseminated through campaign and community meetings so that more and more citizens get to know of the same.

In both Bangladesh and Cambodia, grievance redressal systems have been developed and piloted with the municipal authorities. Review of existing systems revealed that in Rajshahi there was a complaint box at the municipal office and the municipality also had an online grievance redressal system. However, the online system was not accessible to all the citizens, particularly in low income localities. In Cambodia, the only system of registering or sharing complaints was through the councillors in an informal manner. The feedback of citizens on an effective system of grievance redressal was taken through the citizen report as well as the community meetings. This feedback helped in understanding what kind of systems need to be developed that could be accessible and usable by citizens. Based on the feedback from citizens and the requirements of municipalities, appropriate grievance redressal systems were developed. In Bangladesh, a decentralised system at the ward level was strengthened by supporting the ward offices to set up complaint boxes and having complaint registers. In Cambodia, on the other hand, the SAFC developed a system of grievance redressal in which they divided the roles and responsibilities among different

officials in collecting complaints and then disseminating them to different concerned departments. Once this system was prepared it was shared with the communities, and information about the grievance redressal system was disseminated through campaigns as well as community meetings. With greater numbers of citizens aware of the grievance redressal systems, more citizens started lodging their complaints at Rajshahi. In Cambodia, the SAFC has started the process of gathering the complaints at one place and then forwarding them to the respective departments.

In addition to the initial TOT, PRIA during the course of interventions continuously provided coaching, mentoring and technical support to project staff from the CSO partners through discussion sharing of reports, manuals and learning materials. All these contributed to increased capacity and confidence of the project staff. The project staff, however, in each location also fostered a lot of innovative adaptation and contextualisation of Indian experiences. The formation of Social Accountability Facilitation Committee was an innovative example, adopted by the SILAKA team in order to foster ownership by the municipality. The decentralisation of grievance redressal mechanisms at the ward level was an innovation pioneered by the PRIP Trust team.

### **Learning and advocacy through convening and dissemination**

Although the interventions related to social accountability and citizen participation were implemented primarily at the city level one of the objectives of the project was to inform policies and practices at the national and regional level based on the lessons learned from the project. A variety of activities contributed to this objective.

At the sub-city and city levels, interface dialogues and meetings were organised to share the findings of community monitoring, as well as to discuss important emerging issues with the concerned municipal officials. Report card findings were also shared through interface meetings. Once the process of community monitoring began, the focus of the interface meetings was on sharing those findings and negotiating with the local authorities about concerns related to water supply and sanitation services. All relevant stakeholders including citizens, councillors, municipal officials, representatives from other CSOs, representatives from other line departments and private sector etc. were present in these meetings. Agenda and issues to be discussed in the interface meetings were decided and prepared by the CSO partners in consultation with the citizens.

The national policy dialogue on institutionalising social accountability and citizen participation mechanisms provided a venue to showcase the positive results of the project and several lessons, particularly how citizen and civil society can contribute to improving governance. It also highlighted the lesson that, when municipal councillors and officials work together with citizens and civil society through sustained engagement, the results of partnership are far more productive in reducing not only service deficits but also the trust deficits. The national dialogues brought together 150 participants comprised of citizens, councillors, municipal officials, officials from the national ministries, representatives from civil society, and media. Discussions in these policy dialogues also highlighted issues and challenges identified while working with citizens and municipal authorities on social accountability and governance and how these could be addressed through enabling policies at the national level.

The project organised the Asian Regional Conference on “Social Accountability in Municipal Governance” in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. A total of 50 participants comprising representatives of national ministries, policy institutions, city mayors/governors, municipal officials, academic institutions, citizens groups, and civil society attended the conference from 8 Asian countries. While the lessons from the current project were shared by the representatives from each CSO partner, the conference also provided an opportunity to share and learn from practitioners in other Asian countries on issues including: best practice on thematic issues of devolution to municipalities; spaces, practices and challenges of citizen participation; practices, impacts and challenges of monitoring municipal performance by citizens, civil society; use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in making municipal governance participatory and effective; social accountability tools such as proactive disclosures of information, citizen charter and grievance redressal systems; and improving access to services for urban poor through participatory planning were discussed and shared by the Asian practitioners. The participatory nature of the conversations allowed multiple stakeholders to exchange horizontally with other participants.

As media plays an important role not only in educating citizens but also as medium of citizens’ voices, the initiative tried to develop partnerships with media and to sensitise them to issues of accountability and participation. Media personnel were identified to cover various initiatives under the project and also to write articles to sensitise the general public on the issues and challenges facing the marginalised sections of the urban population. These identified media representatives were also part of the study visit in India. In both countries, articles and media briefs were published in local and national dailies. In Cambodia, SILAKA collaborated with Voice of Democracy (a civil society group specialised in community radio programmes) which aired important information through radio.

In order to disseminate the lessons from the project as well as methods of social accountability tools, a number of documents were published, each catered to specific stakeholder. In order to share lessons with the national and sub-national policy-makers, two policy briefs were prepared on institutionalising citizen participation and social accountability in urban governance. The policy-briefs were also translated in Bangla and Khmer for wider circulation. Three facilitators’ manuals on citizen report card, citizen charter and information disclosure and grievance redressal mechanisms were prepared and disseminated in English and local languages. These manuals were not only shared in Bangladesh and Cambodia but also to a large number of practitioners in other Asian countries. Two synthesis papers on citizen engagement and social accountability were published based on the key lessons learned from the project. All these documents were not only disseminated through printed copies but also widely circulated through websites of all the partners and promoted through social media.

## **Key results achieved through DLDG-SAA**

The DLDG-SAA project has contributed to a number of results which are relatively sustainable in the long-run. These changes can be seen through the increased capacity of citizens, civil societies and municipalities in both the countries to collectively practice participatory governance.

## **Enhanced capacities of citizens**

The Neighbourhood Committees formed through the project have provided an effective space for citizen engagement. All the Neighbourhood Committees are evolving as institutions as evidenced through regular monthly meetings and their proceedings maintained in register books. They have provided the citizens with a platform to discuss their issues and concerns. Most of the committees have a mixed composition of women, youth, senior citizens, etc. which makes for a vibrant structure, where opinions, suggestions and ideas are shared and deliberated. Citizens have found a means to channel their voices and as a result, are engaged more constructively on governance issues. One of the primary tasks these Neighbourhood Committees have assumed is to monitor the delivery of municipal services periodically and share the results with the concerned stakeholders. They have prepared a framework for monitoring of public services. Though initially the process of developing indicators and a framework for monitoring of services took longer but it has led to intense brainstorming and discussions among the committee members and the citizens, which is a positive trend. There has been a visible change in terms of the increased participation of citizens on issues that concern them which was not present earlier. As a result of the monitoring being undertaken by the citizens the authorities have become more responsive and accountable to the communities. In Bangladesh, the municipal authorities on the demand of the citizens shifted the garbage disposal site from in front of a public school. In Cambodia as well, the garbage collection van started collecting waste from areas where it never used to visit before after the committee members shared this issue in one of the interface meetings with the municipal authorities.

## **Enhanced capacities of municipalities to institutionalise social accountability mechanisms**

The capacity building events and processes proved to be beneficial for the municipal councillors and officials as well as for the civil society partners. On one hand through these trainings, the officials and councillors were sensitised towards the need and importance of making municipal governance system transparent and accountable; on the other hand it facilitated the process of relationship building between CSOs and municipalities. Municipal authorities in both countries were cooperative and supportive to the efforts made under the project and welcomed the idea of adopting and piloting social accountability tools. In Cambodia, municipal officials and elected representatives came forward and formed the Social Accountability Facilitation Committee, to create systems like the citizen charter, grievance redressal and information disclosure. In Bangladesh, municipal authorities pro-actively participated and cooperated in resolving and addressing needs that emerged from the communities. These systems of social accountability were developed in partnership with the municipal authorities and they were engaged in this process from the very beginning. Thus, a stark difference could be observed in capacities of the municipal authorities from the beginning to the end of the project in understanding and implementation of social accountability tools.

## **Enhanced capacities of local civil society**

The Training of Trainers organised at the beginning of the project proved to be useful for the participants from PRIP Trust, SILAKA and other local CSOs as the concepts and issues of urban governance and social accountability were considerably new to many of them. This

also helped to build a common understanding among the CSO partners about these issues as well as the aims and objectives of the project. Over the course of the project, the civil society partners were able to successfully implement and execute project activities and tasks in spite of numerous challenges. They have been able to understand the dynamics and nuances and through their learning in this process, they now feel more confident to take up the project activities in the coming years.

Representatives from the CSO partners and the local organisations with whom they were engaged in implementing the project were also given hand-holding support and guidance throughout the project period. This support was not only limited to providing formal classroom trainings but also supporting them in taking up various interventions under the project. They were also part of the study visit to India, where they could understand how other municipalities and civil society groups are working towards issues of social accountability and governance in the urban areas. The civil society partners also convened national level policy dialogues in their respective countries, organised campaigns and even facilitated the municipalities to adopt social accountability mechanisms, which reveals that their capacities to undertake such interventions in the urban areas have enhanced considerably.

The PRIP Trust and SILAKA both are now considered as pioneers in social accountability and urban governance issues in their respective countries. In recent years, both have been invited to contribute in designing major social accountability programmes of other distinguished international donors and governments.

### **Informing policies and practices**

The national and regional level policy dialogues helped in creating platforms where issues and challenges of urban governance, social accountability, and citizen participation were discussed and deliberated among different stakeholders. In both the cities, the municipal authorities and other concerned state institutions have been supportive and cooperative to the CSO partners and the needs of the project. They have actively participated in the activities organised under the project. Some of the municipal officials and elected representatives who have been part of the study visit to India, were found to be more engaged and active and they also have brought about changes in introducing the grievance redressal, citizen charter and information disclosures mechanisms.

The experiences and lessons from the project have been systematised and consolidated in the form of the facilitators' manuals, synthesis papers, policy briefs and documentary films. These have been disseminated widely and made available online in the form of an e-book for the practitioners and policy makers.

Since the beginning of DLDG-SAA project in Bangladesh and Cambodia, several positive changes have been observed. For example, in Bangladesh DFID in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh has come up with a multi-million dollar social accountability programme for the CSOs. Similarly, in Cambodia, the World Bank in partnership with the Royal Government of Cambodia initiated Social Accountability Framework in the national programme to strengthen decentralisation. PRIP Trust and SILAKA both have contributed in the design of these programmes based on many lessons learned from DLDG-SAA, however,

PRIA and both the CSO partners are cautious in claiming any direct influence on these programmes.

### **Key challenges**

A few external factors affected the implementation of the project. For example, project initiation in Bangladesh was delayed for almost three months as the required approval from the NGO Affairs Bureau came late. An adverse political environment in Bangladesh towards the end of the project hampered the pace of work to a great extent. Community meetings and interface dialogues could not be conducted as successfully as they were conducted in the previous quarters. In Cambodia on the other hand, the initial lack of willingness on the part of citizens to participate and engage in governance issues was a big constraint. However, this was addressed in the course of the project through regular capacity building programmes.

Another constraint was the unavailability of data at the municipality level. Though the municipal authorities in both the cities have been helpful and shown interest in the project, but even these could not be very helpful in getting the data or required information as some of it was incomplete or not updated.

Conducting the Citizens' Report in Rajshahi and Takhmao was a huge challenge in itself. The planning, sampling, data collection and data collation processes demanded and consumed a lot of time and energy. Although social accountability tools like community score cards and community monitoring etc. had been used in Bangladesh and Cambodia before, but the use of citizens' report card was quite new for both the citizens as well as the partner CSOs. Also as local citizens (youth, women, CBOs etc.) were engaged in the process of data collection and preparing the citizens' report, they had to be oriented and given enough time to understand and internalise the concept and methodology.

In both Bangladesh and Cambodia, the partner organisations had identified some local partners for implementing the project. In most cases, the activities that they implemented were community mobilisation, formation of neighbourhood groups, facilitating the process of community monitoring, meetings and trainings etc. This was strategically planned because: first, the local partners were well aware and acquainted with the ground realities; and second, it was anticipated that these civil society groups will continue to engage with the municipalities even after the completion of the project. However, the challenge was to meet the high expectation of the local partners in terms of financial and technical support and guidance from PRIP Trust and SILAKA.

Another challenge which was persistent throughout the course of the project was the lengthy administrative rules and procedures that had to be followed in dealing with the municipal authorities. This was specifically true of Cambodia, where the approval from the provincial and national level authorities had to be taken for most of the project activities. The formation of the Social Accountability Facilitation Committee was also delayed as getting the approval for the higher authorities was delayed, and without the approval, the municipal authorities could not move forward.



Communication with the project implementing partners regarding the project interventions, status updates of activities, feedback etc. was also challenging. This was due to the fact that most communication and correspondence was done through e-mails, telephone or online video conferences and many a times due to practical or technical difficulties these mechanisms did not functional well. Although these modes of communications are being explored in the project, they cannot actually replace the essence of face to face communication.

PRIP Trust and SILAKA had considerable knowledge and skills on social accountability, however, both the organisations were working on the theme of urban governance for the first time. Applying these concepts in an urban setting was new for them. Therefore, the implementation of some tasks and activities in the beginning of the project took some time. However, over a period of two years, their knowledge and skills on social accountability and urban governance has enhanced considerably.

The project though initially planned for horizontal exchanges between PRIP Trust and SILAKA project staff, however, due to resource constraints these activities had to be dropped out. This was indeed a weakness of the project, as the teams had to rely only on online video conferences and written reports to learn from each other. The learning could have been much intensive and effective, had there been opportunities for face to face interactions among all the project team members.

## **Principles in practice: Busan and emerging SSC**

The case study on DLDG-SAA provides several insights on how some of the principles of SSC as articulated in the Busan document have been put into practice by PRIA, PRIP Trust and SILAKA in their respective countries.

### **Ownership of development priorities**

Right from the conceptualisation of DLDG-SAA project all efforts were made to ensure the ownership of PRIP Trust and SILAKA. Although PRIA signed the contract with UNDEF as the principal project implementing organisation, at every stage of the project proposal preparation and negotiation with the donor all the partners were consulted. PRIP Trust and SILAKA also helped in adapting and contextualising the interventions, thereby reinforcing the local ownership. At every stage of the project implementation all the organisations remained keen learners. In this case study the ownership was indeed understood in a much broader way to include the ownership of community as well as municipalities as the main actors in initiating various governance reforms. The inclusion of mayors/governors, councillors, and officials in study visits and trainings enhanced the ownership of municipal authorities.

Similarly, the citizens wholeheartedly participated in all the capacity building events and monitoring of municipal services. They themselves decided what needs to be monitored and how by identifying the indicators and designing the format for data collection.

### **Mutual transparency and accountability**

The three CSO partners – PRIA, PRIP Trust and SILAKA – remained committed to the principles of transparency and accountability throughout the project implementation. PRIA

while preparing the project proposal clearly earmarked the amount of resources to be allocated to PRIP Trust and SILAKA in a consultative manner in order to effectively implement the project activities and this was communicated and shared with them right at the beginning of the project. PRIP Trust and SILAKA also utilised the resources transparently and whenever resources needed to be reallocated to respond to emerging needs, they consulted PRIA. The transparency and accountability principles were also applied beyond financial transactions. All the organisations held themselves accountable to the project objectives and made their best efforts to ensure that these objectives are met. As implementing organisations of the project all three partners also remained accountable to the citizens and municipalities as evidenced through their involvement in shaping the project interventions.

### **Inclusive development partnerships**

All the three partners believed in openness, trust, mutual respect and learning. They recognised the comparative strengths and advantages of each other and accordingly played their roles. PRIP Trust and SILAKA both were credible and important players in their respective countries. These attributes helped them to implement all the activities at the country level. At the city level both of them included other local CSOs as they had the local knowledge and relationships with other local actors. Since PRIA had the necessary knowledge and skills acquired through the implementation of similar projects in India, it assumed the role of knowledge partner without undermining the existing knowledge and capacities of PRIP Trust and SILAKA. This was one of the reasons why PRIP Trust and SILAKA never hesitated to ask for knowledge support from PRIA. A strong partnership was also developed with citizens' groups and municipality in each city not only with PRIP Trust and SILAKA but also with PRIA. This was possible because of the rapport developed during the study visits to India as well as the leadership of the municipalities also participated in the national and regional conferences where they contributed substantially.

### **Focus on results**

The DLDG-SAA project clearly showed several results produced by the SSC. The results realised through the project perhaps would not have been possible to achieve by a single organisation. The project clearly showed enhanced capacities of citizens, civil societies, municipal officials and councillors. It has somewhat institutionalised a few social accountability mechanisms in both the municipalities. It has also successfully synthesised lessons and disseminated them to a variety of stakeholders effectively. All these results were achieved only through effective partnership between a range of actors.

### **Multi-stakeholder engagement**

The DLDG-SAA project is a classic example of multi-stakeholder engagement. The project was deliberately designed the involvement of multiple stakeholders as the kind of governance issues it tried to address cannot be addressed by a single stakeholder. It ensured the involvement of elected representatives, municipal officials, policy-makers, academicians, media persons, citizens and civil society. The local private sector was also engaged to some extent. These engagements provided enormous learning and sharing opportunities for each stakeholder. The project resources were allocated to enhance the capacities of all the stakeholders. One of the most interesting aspects of the project was to

create joint learning opportunities involving more than one stakeholder like the study visits in India, interface meeting and conferences at the local, national and regional levels.

## **Conclusion**

Civil society organisations in many Asian countries are playing important role in strengthening and making local governance institutions more transparent and accountable. The social accountability mechanisms practiced by civil society and citizens have made considerable impact in improving public services to the citizens. However, many such impacts have remained local and limited to selected countries where these experiments have taken place. There is a need to be scaled up these innovations in other Asian countries through appropriate policies and practices. The principles of South-South Cooperation have the potential to foster learning between countries and communities beyond nation-state borders.

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## Role of Civil Society in South-South Cooperation

This case study report was produced as part of a project highlighting how civil society organisations (CSOs) contribute to the roles middle income countries play not just as recipients of aid, but also as innovators and providers of development cooperation. The project drew on a review of available literature, evidence from BRICS countries and Mexico collected by the IDS Rising Powers in International Development programme, and four case studies. These case studies, undertaken by number of partners and organisations including Articulação SUL, PRIA and Shack/Slum Dwellers International, illustrate the role of civil society organisations cooperating across a range of contexts. These include fragile and post-disaster situations, as well as cooperation between middle and low income countries. The case studies examine CSOs' international roles in providing services, promoting social accountability, supporting post-disaster reconstruction and sharing rural and urban development knowledge that derives from their own domestic experiences.

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## Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the contributions of Rajesh Tandon, President, PRIA and Shreya Maria Kuruvilla, Programme Officer, PRIA

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First published by the Institute of Development Studies in April 2014  
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