

Leave No One Behind

Citizen's Platform Briefing Note

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Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

About the Programme

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework has explicitly referred to youth as a key constituency and has underlined the importance of youth participation in SDG implementation as a crucial driver of expected outcomes. Youth make up for more than half of Bangladesh's population, much higher than the global average of about 16 per cent. Given this, one can not overemphasise the need for a proactive role of youth in SDG implementation, monitoring and evaluation. With the objective to explore opportunities and scope of youth involvement in SDG implementation and accountability processes, a virtual global sharing session was organised by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, in partnership with ActionAid Bangladesh, on 10th June 2021. Southern Voice Network was the outreach partner of the event. The idea was to share the experiences of youth-driven VLRs (Voluntary Local Reviews) and examine cross-country experiences in the area of localising the SDGs. The objective was also to review the experiences of youth-led accountability initiatives to hold local-level public institutions accountable for implementing the SDGs. Keeping these objectives in the purview, the discussion was framed around mobilisation, localisation and accountability experiences, from global and national standpoints, with a view to raising the efficacy of implementation of the SDGs through more active participation of youth people.

YOUTH, SDG ACCOUNTABILITY & THE VOLUNTARY LOCAL REVIEW Situating Bangladesh's Experience within the Global Context

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION: MAIN HIGHLIGHTS

The virtual dialogue was moderated by *Mr Towfiqul Islam Khan*, Senior Research Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). The discussion was initiated by keynote presentation which laid out the context of and highlighted the objectives of the discussion and focused on the experiences of youth engagement in SDG implementation in Bangladesh and some selected countries of the keynote was presented by *Ms Najeeba Mohammed Altaf*, Programme Associate at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

Context & Background

The role of youth as a key stakeholder was recognised and emphasised at the time when the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were first conceived. A-third of the 17 goals explicitly mention the 'youth'. As was noted, youth constitute a large part of global and national populations. Worldwide there are 1.2 billion young people, and it will be incumbent upon the youth to play the leadership role in steering global development in the coming years. Given the responsibility vested on the young generation in the context

of the SDGs implementation and the contextual reality in which young people live, it is only natural that the expectations from the youth in view of the SDGs will be high.

The youth in Bangladesh face many challenges, on several fronts. Even before the pandemic, the young people in Bangladesh were facing rising levels of unemployment. This was more acute among the educated youth of the country among whom prevalence of unemployment was much higher compared to their lesser-educated cohorts. Along with job market issues, child marriage, high rates of adolescent fertility, low education completion rates and skills deficit were problems that afflicted the youth. These challenges are being exacerbated during the pandemic times in the backdrop of income erosion, loss of employment opportunities problems in accessing education.

Regrettably, in spite of the role expected of the young people, they hardly get the needed opportunities to play a proactive role in SDG implementation. SDG accountability mechanisms, such as the Voluntary National Review (VNR), do not give adequate attention to youth issues. When Bangladesh presented the first VNR to the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2017, youth was only briefly mentioned towards the end of the document in reference to involving them in future accountability processes. True, some efforts towards this were reflected in the subsequent VNR presented by Bangladesh, in 2020. Invitations were extended to youth groups selected by the Ministry of Youth and Sports to 'consultation meetings.' However, it was also acknowledged that several of these meetings had not taken place due to the ongoing pandemic.

While efforts towards encouraging meaningful youth involvement in accountability processes are mentioned in documents, their participation will only be effective if young people are involved in the entire spectrum of activities in the SDG implementation chain. The first issue relates to representation of the youths in the various consultation processes. The VNRs make no explicit mention of the composition of the youth groups and who gets to be invited. Diversity is highlighted but not documented. Issues concerning the youth that call for urgent attention are ignored. Youth-relevant policies and programmes in Bangladesh tend to be focused primarily on education and unemployment sector related issues.

Mobilisation Experience

Global literature evince a number of cases of involvement of youth in empowerment and mobilisation processes in the context of SDG implementation and accountability at national level. Countries such as Canada and Burkina Faso have established formally recognised councils with mandated roles for youth representatives. As a means of legitimising the youth movement in SDG accountability, Canada's "Prime Minister's Council" and Burkina Faso's "Ombudsman for the youth aims" to raise awareness and encourage the youth to participate in SDG related activities (United Nations, 2018)¹.

Following the official recognition, international initiatives such as PACE's "Youth Multimedia Campaign Training Program" went on to spur "Africa Bridge Connect" which is a youth-led initiative. Mention may also be made of 'Act 2030' which successfully conducted SDG-focused training programmes. These programs strengthened capacities of youth and empowered them by encouraging use of technology to collect, organise and monitor data relevant to promoting well-being and rights of the young people (Population Resource Bureau, 2020)².

In Bangladesh, however, the VNRs mention mobilisation of youth in SDG accountability process solely within the scope of general consultation meetings. However, government's initiatives this regards they do fail to connect the youth to the many concerned national policies

¹<https://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/inline/Commonwealth%20report.pdf>

²<https://thepaceproject.org/2020/10/27/recent-successes/>

and strategies which range from the National Youth Policy 2017 to the National Service Programmed and the Skills for Employment Investment Programme (SEIP). On the other hand, common theme of these youth-dedicated and youth-oriented policies relates to enhancing employability of the youth in Bangladesh which is a major limitation of these policies.

On the contrary, non-state actors in Bangladesh were found to be engaged in activities that go beyond the narrow remit of youth employability. For example, partners of the Citizen's Platform include 24 exclusively youth related platforms, nine (9) youth-based programs initiated by NGOs and nine (9) "other" platforms working with the youth (such as the Bangladesh Debating Council, Debate for Democracy and Aamrai Bangladesh). As the list would suggest, these groups are involved in a wide range of activities.

Same as a (with previous one). For example, the United Nations Youth and Students Association of Bangladesh (UNYSAB) is encourage which launched the National Budget Olympiad to raise awareness and increase youth participation in the context of the Bangladesh national budget. Through this initiative, about 3000 students from 35 universities and colleges across Bangladesh were engaged in lively discussions cantering around key budget related issues. Ignite Youth Foundation provided free access to computers and internet, organised capacity building, coaching/counselling sessions and training on event management, environmental issues, leadership, and provided career guidance to underprivileged youths.

Global experiences involving youth in the SDG implementation bear out that there were several cases where youth were assigned formal roles for participating in, and contributing to, concerned country's development processes. Youth-based initiatives are also there which are geared to engaging the youth in SDG implementation and follow-ups. Bangladesh youth policies, as was noted, focus mainly on employment, deal with education and skills development issues. As was noted above, non-state actors are involved in a range of youth-focused areas starting from raising awareness on SDG-related issues to environment-focused movements.

Localisation & Contextualisation Experience

Globally, initiatives to localise SDG accountability and youth participation are few and far between. However, an indepth examination of the VLRs from across the globe reveals that there are already some notable efforts in a number of countries in this context. Mention may be made in this connection of the "Parliament of Children" and "Youth Council" in Turku, Finland. In another VLR published by O'ahu, Hawaii, establishment of local "O'ahu Youth Commission" is mentioned as a means of recognising youth voices and ensuring that they are heard in the long-term planning of the city. Cities such as Porto Alegre in Brazil and Boston in USA have used "participatory budgeting" as a means of reducing inequality by educating the youth as regards financial allocation in the budget. The core purpose of such an initiative was rooted in raising civic awareness among the youth and to encourage them to act for the protection of their own rights (United Nations, 2018).

In case of Bangladesh, youth-centric activities focused mainly on providing general skills training through district youth development offices. In accordance with the National Youth Policy 2017, youth training centers were established in 11 districts. Capacity of training institutes to teach ICT was enhanced in 64 districts. Efforts to create employment and self-employment opportunities for unemployed youths were initiated in seven districts in Bangladesh. While the district youth development offices are supposed to have online and offline platforms, regrettably, the former does not provide detailed and follow-up information on the services provided to the youths at the local level.

In view of localising the SDGs, the government of Bangladesh has issued three gazette notifications on 16th of May 2019 which called for formation of divisional, district and

upazila level committees. These committees were to be created to implement, coordinate, and monitor SDGs across the three levels. While this initiative, no doubt, is a major step towards localising the SDGs in Bangladesh, the roles of relevant stakeholders in this process have not been explicitly outlined, including the role to be assigned to local youths.

In the context of national non-state actor (NSA) experience, a significantly large number of non-state actors were involved in a wide range of activities to localise the SDGs. One such example was the Barisal Youth Society (BYS), the largest youth-led organisation in the Barisal district of Bangladesh. This local platform is focused on sheltering young underprivileged girls and protect & working to their rights. Other activities included providing educational sessions, skills development opportunities and even delivering necessities such as food to underprivileged families.

In terms of promoting SDG accountability and mobilising youth participation at the local level, initiative taken by ActionAid Bangladesh, jointly with four local NGOs, merits special mention. As part of this partnership, four voluntary local reviews were conducted in view of implementing the SDGs.

In partnership with Nari Maitree in Dhaka, Badhon in Bagerhat, Udayankar Seba Sanghsta (USS) in Nilphamari and Bangladesh Institute of Arts (BITA) in Chittagong, under took a number of youth-led initiatives between August and November 2020. 1636 households were surveyed and 24 Focus Group Discussions and 40 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were organised. Respondents included people of different age groups; however, the majority, 56.6 per cent of those were between the ages of 18-29 years. Within the youth respondents, 53 per cent were male and the rest 47 per cent were female. Overall, the findings show that while implementation of a majority of the indicators was on target, particularly especially in the health sector (in terms of maternal, under-5 and child mortality rates), there were challenges and lack of required progress in such areas as ensuring equal pay for equal work, local conflict resolution and inclusivity of participation in local and national level decision making.

Experiences of youth involvement and localisation may be summarised in the following way. In many countries youth were assigned a formal role. In some countries youth are involved in such areas as participatory budgeting processes conducted at local levels (Brazil and the United States), battling inequality and raising civic awareness about SDG-related issues in a number of countries. Concerning Bangladesh, at the national level some initiatives have been taken up that included setting up of district-wise youth development offices and issuance of gazette notifications calling for the creation of local committees to facilitate SDG implementation, monitoring and evaluation. However, the roles and responsibilities of relevant stakeholders in Bangladesh are yet to be clearly spell out. However, non-state actors in Bangladesh including, in particular ActionAid Bangladesh, have taken up many activities to promote and advance the cause of SDG implementation in Bangladesh. ActionAid Bangladesh has pioneered the VLR initiative which was carried out in four districts, by partnering with four local NGOs, which merits special mention.

Accountability Experience

Globally, 19 officially reported VLRs are available that were published by nine (9) different countries which have dealt with issues of holding local institutions accountable. However, in terms of youth-led accountability processes, the examples are very few. Japan's Youth Platform for Sustainability's youth-led informal shadow report is the most notable example which is, however, an exception.

Bangladesh has participated in VNR presentation at HLPFs held in 2017 and 2020. In both VNRs it was mentioned that young people were involved in SDG accountability process through sharing of the VNR report and participation in consultation meetings. However, as was mentioned above, there, while welcome, need to be strong-themed further.

From the non-state actors' perspective, the Voluntarily Local Review initiative by Action Aid Bangladesh to map SDG accountability, with a focus on marginalized and excluded

young people, has been one of the pioneering initiatives to promote youth-led accountability. As part of this initiative information was generated on the basis of the four district-wise dedicated reviews carried out to prepare the 'shadow' national report.

Outlook

Following recommendations can be made based on good practices gleaned from the available global literature.

- a. Young people should be involved in activities that go beyond passive consultation processes. They should be encouraged to provide inputs to local and national SDG accountability mechanisms in a proactive manner. In view of the (General Economic Division) GED's recent proposal to form divisional, district, and upazila level councils for SDG implementation and coordination, initiatives should be taken to ensure proper youth representation at each of these levels.
- b. Rather than solely focusing on skills for employability, youth-focused skills training programs organised by both government and non-state actors should also include training to collect data, through modern ICT solutions initiatives should be relevant to protection of youth's well-being and permission of exercise of youth rights.
- c. SDG-related and youth-based councils should be set up and these should be encouraged to work on in line with the climate change-focused issues.

Summary of the discussion

Taking part in the discussion, *Ms Farah Kabir*, Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh kicked off her remarks by stating that "If the SDGs aren't implemented at the local level, they won't be implemented on a national level or anywhere either." *Ms Riina Jussila*, Sustainable Development Expert, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), observed that while the VLRs are not officially mandated and are not explicitly referred to in the Agenda 2030, the exercise itself and the resultant document are important for a number of reasons. Enhanced stakeholder engagement and inclusiveness of the SDG implementation process are important in raising quality of governance in SDG implementation and tackling geographical inequalities. VLRs will be presented at a separate session at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2021, she informed. Unfortunately, there is still no official definition of the VLR, she observed however. Youth-led VLRs are the first of their kind and can potentially set a precedent for future VLR initiatives. Using the Bristol SDG Alliance as an example, *Ms Jussila* further expanded on how the VLR should integral by involve universities and students in the process of SDG implementation. As of 2020, there were three (3) countries that have taken advantage of the VLR, to support their respective VNRs. These countries were Kenya, Uganda and Finland. Despite the VLR not being officially mandated, the guidelines for the VNRs were updated in 2020, calling for promoting inclusively of the VLR exercise.

Ms Suwaiba Yakubu-Jibrin, Director of Programmes, ActionAid Nigeria, informed the audience that in Nigeria, the point of entry into SDG implementation was community mobilisation. Emphasising that SDG implementation was not a one-time project, she insisted that it was the responsibility of relevant government agencies to ensure that there are gender-responsive services and dedicated climate resilience strategies and initiatives. Community mobilisation should begin with a 'strategic partnership' where there is a role for youth-led data generation through community participation. This information is then to be linked to the national level through accountability mechanism, driven by the CSOs at the state level. Such a mechanism is called "Inclusive Forum for Accountable Society" or IFAS for short. As of now, more than 500 youths have been mobilised in this process in Nigeria.

Additionally, centres have been opened up in communities to bridge the gap created by lack of availability of technical knowledge. Many youths in communities require technical support, space to discuss issues and raise concerns. These community centres also paved the way for youth-led digital movements to engage with the government.

Till now, the most significant step concerned involving the youth within CSOs to set up the Nigerian Youth SDG network. This network pursues evidence-based advocacy, putting pressure on relevant government agencies and seeking out responses.

On the formalisation of youth roles, *Mr Daya Sagar Shrestha*, Chairperson, National Campaign for Sustainable Development Nepal (NACASUD-Nepal), informed that they have set up a National Youth Council as part of the National Youth Policy. It has clear guidelines on youth engagement in the various SDG implementation processes. There are also youth councils at the district level and even at the level of some municipalities. To support localised SDG implementation, there is a separate SDG localisation guideline.

With the aim of encouraging youth participation in Nepal, the Youth SDG alliance engages in various activities at national, province and municipality levels. The alliance is involved in raising awareness and has organised Youth Forums in 2019, 2020 and even in 2021, where SDG implementation and its follow-up is discussed. *Ms Estefania Charvet*, Head of Programmes, Southern Voice, felt that the VLR is an initiative that has come to stay over the long term. One of the major reasons driving this is that it provides an opportunity for inclusive governance. It is also an opportunity to raise awareness about the SDGs among the youth and equip them with ICT skills and leverage ICT to amplify their messages and reach broader communities. As part of Southern Voice's Knowledge Hub initiative about 800 resources have been put in a database with experts on hand to provide necessary support. The Hub has the potential to connect local communities with their global counterparts. The Hub will help identify and prioritise issues of concern and interest to youth communities.

In the backdrop of governmental support in backing SDG implementation on a national or local level in Brazil, *Mr Vitor Mihessen* of Casa Fluminense, Brazil, informed that they have prepared their own "Spotlight" report, a shadow report to track SDG implementation. In the cities on the outskirts of Rio De Janeiro, they have taken initiative to collect materials with the objective of generating data on these areas. This information is then used to create public proposals known as the "Local Agenda 2030."

Brazil had its census cancelled, which was important indicator of the lack of official interest in up-to-date data. In response, local communities have taken up the initiative of "Citizen Generated Data", where communities generate their own data, conduct research and create their own basket of indicators, and create "Inequality Maps". They match their own data to each of the SDGs indicators. This helps local research groups to help distribute necessities like baskets of food in a well-targeted manner. The inequality maps were found to be very useful especially during the pandemic period.

Bringing the discussion back to Bangladesh, *Ms Reneka Ahmed Antu*, Youth Advocate, Plan International Bangladesh, mentioned that Covid-19 has reinforced the importance of digital participation. Given the demographic divide that Bangladesh is experiencing, if the youth are not participating in the virtual and digital world right now, they will be pushed further behind in comparison to their counterparts in other countries. Sharing his experience, *Mr Kazi Ashief Mahmood*, Project Officer-DRR, BRAC, informed that youths in Zambia sought out voluntary work experience as an alternative form of employment in the face of shrinking economic activities during the pandemic. This process was further strengthened when the Ministry of Youth partnered with the NGOs to support community- and national-level youth volunteers. These were provided with allowances and work-time flexibilities, enabling the youths to work in the morning and take university classes in the afternoon. *Ms Sesheeni Selvaratnam* of International Programme & Policy Lead, ActionAid Denmark, shed light on the scale and scope of youth participation in other countries. In this connection she shared

the example of Zambian youth who had been part of the Green Movement in her country and was invited to write the chapter on youth in Zambia's VNR. She also mentioned that the UN Youth Envoy office has been focusing on engaging youth on local and national levels. Seven countries will be selected for conducting surveys on youth participation in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs.

Summarising the rich discussion at the global dialogue, *Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya*, Convenor, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh and Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) highlighted five key takeaways. Youth participation needs to be much more inclusive & youth-based strategies should acknowledge and effectively involve the disengaged youth. The second point centred around the fact that socio-economic implications of COVID-19 was likely to far outlive the attendant health implications. As such, forward-looking strategies must take the pandemic impacts into consideration along with the fact of exacerbation of embedded challenge such as high unemployment rates and rampant child marriages. The third point related to generation and collection of timely and disaggregated data through innovative data collection methods. Fourth, protection of civic spaces was important to allow the youth to exercise their voice, particularly in the post pandemic period. Finally, it was important to focus on the need to articulate youth issues using the SDGs as a framework, focusing on organisation, mobilisation and involvement of the youth in the SDG accountability processes at national and local levels.

Platform Briefing Notes

- Briefing Note 01 : **Strengthening Effectiveness of the Non-State Actors' in COVID-19 Response Activities.** (June 2020)
- Briefing Note 02 : **Post- 'General Holidays' Health Risks.** (June 2020)
- Briefing Note 03 : **New Challenges for SDGs and Budget 2020-21.** (October 2020)
- Briefing Note 04 : **Experiences from the Current Situation at the Grassroots Level.** (October 2020)
- Briefing Note 05 : **Voluntary National Review 2020 and Youth Perspectives.** (October 2020)
- Briefing Note 06 : **Post-Pandemic Status of CMSMEs and Effectiveness of Stimulus Packages.** (February 2021)
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- Briefing Note 07 : **Proposed City Court Act in Bangladesh: Challenges of Implementation.** (March 2021)
- ব্রিফিং নোট ০৮ : কোভিড ১০ টিকা: বাংলাদেশে কে, কখন, কীভাবে পাবে? (জানুয়ারি ২০২১)
- Briefing Note 09 : **Why is the Price of Rice Rising? Who Gains, Who Loses?** (February 2021)
- Briefing Note 10 : **Remittance Flows in Recent Times: Where from is So Much Money Coming?** (February 2021)
- ব্রিফিং নোট ১১ : কালো টাকা সাদা হচ্ছে: অর্থনীতির লাভ, না ক্ষতি? (মে ২০২১)
- ব্রিফিং নোট ১২ : অবশেষে স্কুল খুলছে: আমরা কতখানি প্রস্তুত (এপ্রিল ২০২১)
- ব্রিফিং নোট ১৩ : জাতীয় বাজেট ২০২১-২২: পিছিয়ে পড়া মানুষের জন্য কী থাকছে? (মে ২০২১)
- ব্রিফিং নোট ১৪ : এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে জবাবদিহিতা: স্থানীয় প্রেক্ষিত ও যুব সমাজ (জুলাই ২০২১)

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Introductory Remarks

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Concluding Remarks

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