Hon. Secretary Abdul Malek, Secretary, Local Government Division, Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development & Cooperatives, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh

Invited to the World Bank Headquarters in Washington, DC, for the sixth Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) Steering Committee Meeting, we asked Mr. Abdul Malek, Hon. Secretary for Local Government Division in Bangladesh, a few questions about the work that he does and what motivates him to work towards good governance within local government.

1. What are some of the experiences that put you on the path that led you to what you’re doing today?
Over my long career, I’ve had the opportunity to work in different capacities with exposure to different fields in serving the government. I have been serving the Local Government Division for a number of years, because I am convinced that the desired development of the country towards a "Golden Bangladesh" that Bangabandhu Sheikh MujiburRahman, the father of the nation, dreamed of could only be achieved with the development of rural Bangladesh. The most important way to do that is through the establishment of good governance at local government institutions with wideparticipation of people.

At this point in my career, when I look back and quickly take stock, I do recognize that the bulk of my professional learning has been accumulated from my interactive engagements with the grassroots based people – the ultimate customers of the public administration services.

During the last 30 years, I have experienced significant institutional changes and paradigm shifts in Bangladesh’s public administration and local governance. Furthermore, because of dynamic political leadership and guidance added with structural andprocedural changes, there has been a significant change in the mind-set and orientation of public bureaucracy in Bangladesh. It is now more responsive, proactive and service oriented. As a result, we have entered into a new era what academics call "New Public Management" which is based on the principles of performance management, responsiveness of public officials, changes of management tools and approaches compatible with market mechanisms, quality management techniques, etc. Thus, I have witnessed that the character of the public administration system has been transformed from being a regulatory system to anactive facilitator of economic growth, and emerged as a lead agent of essential service providers to the public.

If I summarize my institutional learning from the path that led me to what I am today, it would be the following: 1) I am convinced that "development from below" is more sustainable, cost-effective and haslasting impact; 2) Accountability not only enhances the quality of governance, but also brings community and professionals closer, creating a platform of constructive engagement and ultimately enhancing mutual trust and dependency; and 3) The right mix of wisdom and vision of politicians and the professionalism of public bureaucracy can enhance the pace and process of development.

Therefore, when I plan and act as a policy maker, I keep such learning in the back of my mind to determine my course of action.

2. Why are you most interested in Local Government?
As you know, the Local Governments are the institutions which are located at the peoples’ doorstep. Constitutionally, these are destined to serve the people in their day-to-day affairs and needs.
Decentralization is considered an important prerequisite for addressing many of the social, economic and political concerns at the local level.

In our context, Bangladesh has a five tier Local Government System. In the rural areas, there are 4,545 Union Parishads at the lowest tier, 491 Upazilas (Sub-District) in the middle, and 64 Zila (District) Parishads at the top. In the urban areas, there are 327 Municipalities and 11 City Corporations. All these Local Government Institutions (LGI) are run by democratically elected bodies. The latest elections held at different local bodies were on a political basis with huge enthusiasm throughout the country.

It is pertinent to mention here that women empowerment is one of the strategies of the Local Governance in Bangladesh. At present, the Union Parishads, Upazilas Parishads, Zila Parishads, Municipalities and City Corporations have special provisions of reserve seats of elected representatives for women. Each Union Parishad has three women members reserve seats out of a total of twelve seats, directly elected by the voters, the constituencies being equal to that of three general members. Besides, 30% of the schemes are to be selected by the women member of the locality. In the Upazila Parishad, one seat is reserved out of the two Vice Chairman is a woman. In Urban areas, each municipality has three women councilors, out of total twelve, directly elected by the voters. Similarly, Zila Parishads and the City Corporations have reserved seats for women. For other all seats, women can participate as same proportion like male candidates.

I strongly believe LGIs can play a significant role in deepening democratic practices in Bangladesh. The seventh Five Year Plan also has set a new policy agenda to enhance the role of LGIs in local economic development to pursue the move upward to new ambitions, such as middle income country status.

Bangladesh is working hard to institutionalize and deepen democracy at the grassroots. There is in fact a paradigm shift in the legal and regulatory framework regarding the LGIs. New laws and legal frameworks have been framed to institutionalize social accountability of the LGI through the installation of community based planning, accountability system and consultative processes. Such institutional interventions have already started showing the dividends. Independent studies have shown that there is considerable improvement in the quality of governance of LGIs in terms of transparency, accountability and participation. Most importantly, such innovations have also changed the image and overall institutional trust in LGIs.

3. What motivated you to lead this division in BD, and what would you say most motivates you to continue your work?

Bangladesh graduated to the status of lower-middle income country. This achievement was accomplished some six years ahead of the government’s projected timeline of crossing the threshold of a middle income economy by 2021. The country has steady grown since Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was re-elected in 2009. Bangladesh has transformed its agrarian economy into a modern economy, has reduced its dependency on traditional agricultural, and has expanded its industrial and services sectors. The economy has also been integrated into the global economy through higher exports, imports, remittances and foreign direct investment.

The most important issue of the graduation into the middle income group is the long-term sustainability through inclusive growth in the long run. In this regard, there are many actors and the Local Government Division is one of them.

For sustainable growth, good governance is a pre-condition. The Local Government Division can contribute to sustainable growth ensuring good governance with inclusiveness because it has more than 67,000 elected local government representatives all over the country. At the grassroots level,
there are 59,085 elected representatives in 4,545 Union Parishads who have direct interaction with their constituencies. They contribute to the growth of the grassroots economy through investment in developing rural infrastructures that facilitates the mobility of passengers and goods. This reduces the cost of transport of input and output, which in turn reduces the production cost helps the growth of agriculture and other economic activities.

The local government organizations also contribute to different spheres of life by providing people with potable water, sanitation and hygiene facilities, a waste disposalsystem and social afforestation for a sound environment and to face the challenges ofclimate change.

Bangladesh has now a GDP growth rate of 7.1%. That has played a positive role ineradicating poverty. The robust growth has been accompanied by corresponding improvements in several social indicators, such as increased average life expectancy and lower fertility rate, despite having one of the world's highest population densities. This impressive performance is the result of the persuasion of pro-poor and an inclusive growth strategy.

The Present Government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina adopted the Vision of 2021. In Vision 2021, local government has been given due importance. Local government institutions will play an important role in governance as well as in development programs. The Government places special emphasis on strengthening the local government in order to bring the public services closer to the people and also to make sure local people's preferences are well reflected in the planning process. The 7th FYP is committed to undertake a comprehensive set of actions, including: 1) Building the capacity of local governments through the assignment of appropriate officials, technical assistance and training programs; 2) Developing planning and budgeting capacities at the local-level to help design and implement local-level programs; 3) Fostering initiatives to provide technical assistance to link local level plan to thenational medium to long term planning.

4. What are the goals you most want to accomplish?
The Government of Bangladesh is determined to achieve the SDG targets by 2030. What motivates me is that inclusive growth in the long run can only be done by strengthening and empowering local governments and building the capacity to make decisions that impact the local constituents.

The Local Government Division is implementing a Local Governance Support Project (LGSP) to strengthen the Union Parishads. Through the first and second generation of LGSP projects, direct fiscal transfer system to the Union Parishad’s bank accounts has been introduced. The introduction of Basic Block Grants is a milestone for strengthening local government system at the grassroots. Moreover, with the implementation of Local Governance Support Projects (LGSP-I & LGSP-2), there has been a gradual strengthening of the Union Parishad in playing its role in local development activities with sufficient freedom and with active participation of local community in designing, planning, management and implementation of schemes according to their choices and preferences. Under the project, the planning is done on popular participation at the ward-level with a bottom-up approach. This bottom-up approach has also resulted in transparency and accountability of the local government functionaries to the local community.

The Third Party Monitoring process under the Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) has further strengthened the local government system in terms of transparency and accountability. Major achievements as of now are: a bottom-up approach in development; active participation of the local community in planning and management of development activities according to their needs and choices; capacity building of the local government functionaries in planning and implementing local level schemes; and eventually, the development of a sense of ownership amongst the local community over the local level development.
Now, based on the success of LGSP, the Local Government Division (LGD) is in the process of institutionalization of a predictable Fiscal Transfer System and independent Auditing of the LGIs at the grassroot level with a World Bank supported Third Local Government Support Project (LGSP-3). At the same time, for the municipalities, LGD is supporting strengthening of local level planning process with citizen participation in decision-making of the capital investments and prioritization process. This is now being carried out through Municipal Governance and Services Projects, another project financed by the World Bank.

Bangladesh has been piloting a number of projects to enhance the institutional capacity of LGIs with the active support from bilateral and multilateral development partners, including the World Bank. We have assessed those pilot and experimental projects and have institutionalized some of the best practices, like open budget systems, and community-based and gender-responsive planning. One of the best practices is the block grant system tied to performance grants. We are now deeply committed to institutionalizing the block grant system. We are glad that the World Bank has come forward to assist us under LGSP-3, which aims at institutionalization of Union Parishads fiscal transfer system to provide basic block grants and performance based grants to eligible Union Parishads; enhancing and institutionalizing the UP audits and performance assessment and management information systems; introducing expanded block grants to pilot Pourashavas; and capacity development and project implementation support.

We expect at the end of the project that we would be able to institutionalize the fiscal transfer to Union Parishads; enhance quality of annual financial audits and performance assessments system of all Union Parishads; set a system and standard for Union Parishads for meeting the local priorities, record the share of the beneficiaries, through disaggregated data on gender and meeting local priorities, finally be able to release Extended Block Grants on a transparent and predictable basis to participating LGIs (Pourashava).

My ultimate goals are three-fold: 1) To develop a system which ensures smooth fiscal transfer from central to local government; 2) To ensure that transparency and financial discipline in maintained with high standard of operating practices; and 3) To ensure that mechanisms for social accountability of LGIs are in place.

At the policy level, in line with the priorities set out by the seventh Five Year Plan, I would like to work on the following on a priority basis: 1) Develop an intergovernmental fiscal transfer policy; 2) Design a comprehensive Local Government Legal Framework to create a strong LGI system; 3) Examine the long pending proposal of creating a 'Local Government Service' with a long-term vision to bring sustained professionalism at the LGI levels.

5. What’s next for you in your work, and what kind of spaces do you see for constructive engagement with government?

The nation is working in implementing the programs under the seventh Five Year Plan with a view to achieve the 2021 vision and the SDGs as well. The Government has also embarked on the formulation of a Delta Plan 2100. However, the next course of action in our work would be on intensifying the citizen engagement process to ensure transparency and accountability so that the local development needs are addressed in an inclusive manner. For this purpose, various measures will be taken for proper functioning of the existing forums for citizen engagement such as Ward Shabha, Union Parishad Standing Committees, Ward Committees and Scheme Supervision Committees.

Another course of action will be improving governance through intense capacity building at the local level. To this end, measures like intensive training for Local Government functionaries and its various
committee members, financial support, manpower support, reformation in Local Government Acts through necessary changes in its rules and regulation, gradual increase in Local Government income from its own revenues.

In fact, the spaces are already there and we are already having deep and constructive engagements with government. As I previously mentioned, the Local Government is a high priority area constitutionally, politically and at the policy-level. By now we have formed a Policy Advisory Group (PAG) composed of representatives from LGI, CSOs, academics, researchers, and professionals from different line agencies and senior officials from the ministry of Local Government. The PAG is providing insights, research support, advice and feedback on various policy issues that certainly brings qualitative changes in the overall mandate of the Local Government Division.

In conclusion, if it may be said, there is enough positive space on the part of local government for constructive engagement with the government under existing laws of the land. Though there is demarcation in works between central and local governments by law, there areas of cooperation and complementary role in between the governments exists. On top of that, the past experience over the last ten years through LGSP-1 and LGSP-2 and different departments and LGD suggests a positive picture with respect to the role the local government functionaries and the local communities played in discharging Union Parishads functions in local development. Thus, there exists an optimistic scope for constructive engagement with the government with a view to intensify the process of citizen engagement to ensure transparency and accountability of local governments and good governance.