The Role of Social Accountability in Poverty Alleviation Programs in Developing Countries: An Analysis With Reference to Bangladesh

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Abstract: In spite of different approaches being experimented over the past six decades, poverty alleviation programs in the developing world have largely failed to improve poverty situation. Of all the factors responsible for the growing trend of poverty, the accountability of public officials remains an intriguing one. The relative ineffectiveness of conventional accountability mechanisms has given rise to social accountability practices. This paper aims to explore the terrain of social accountability and its role in poverty alleviation programs in Bangladesh. The paper argues that despite the great potentials, social accountability mechanisms work with difficulties in Bangladesh owing to contemporary socio-economic and political realities.

Key words: Social accountability, Poverty alleviation, Developing countries, Bangladesh

Introduction

Poverty alleviation is a serious concern for the developing world. It is on top of its agenda of development policies and programs. Most governments are striving hard to eradicate poverty. However, despite all efforts, poverty alleviation programs have failed to deliver desired results. While there are many factors responsible for the poor performance, the lack of public accountability is considered a major one. Accountability is not only a hall mark of democratic governance, it is an essential element for improving the performance of state-sponsored development programs for the poor people. Historically, different conventional mechanisms have been used to enhance accountability of public officials, but they have fallen short of improving the performance of the development programs meant for the poor people. There is now a consensus that

participation of the poor people or the institutions representing them in diverse poverty alleviation programs is a necessary condition for improving their wellbeing. Therefore, the focus has now shifted to exercise social accountability in the developing countries. Social accountability is based on civic engagement in various forms, an essential civic engagement process required for public accountability under any circumstances. This is particularly important for the poverty alleviation programs in a poverty-stricken country such as Bangladesh where poor people or the institutions representing them are attempting to devise various mechanisms to hold public officials accountable for performance. However, it is not an easy job to do in the country considering its prevailing socio-economic and political realities.

This paper is an attempt to analyze the potentials of social accountability in improving the performance of poverty alleviation programs and the constraints thereof in Bangladesh. The objectives of the paper are: (i) to construct a theoretical framework for understanding the problematic of social accountability in poverty alleviation programs; (ii) to analyze social accountability initiatives in the poverty alleviation landscape of Bangladesh; and (iii) to examine the factors supporting and/or constraining social accountability in poverty alleviation programs in the country.

A Conceptual Review of Social Accountability

In this section, a discussion on the conceptual development of social accountability is presented to highlight its evolving nature and to propose theoretical construct for analytical purpose.

Social accountability is a part of the vast terrain of the public accountability discourse. While public accountability is intimately related with democratic governance (Behn, 2001), accountability is linked to most aspects of good governance (Jayal, 2008). Corruption, clientelism and capture are endemic in the developing world and accountability plays an important role in fighting against these vices. Accountability is a "pro-active process by which public officials inform about and justify their plans of action, their behavior and results and are sanctioned accordingly" (Ackerman, 2004). With an increased emphasis on accountability, the concept has been defined in a range of ways from punishment or sanction to answerability and enforcement (Sarker, 2011).

There are three alternative models that have gained currency in recent years against the perceived ineffectiveness of the conventional accountability mechanisms (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012). First, the market-based managerial model tends to strengthen public accountability by reducing the role of the government and establishing a direct linkage between service providers and service receivers. Second, there is an emphasis on establishing a linkage between horizontal state mechanisms with introducing the right to information. The right to information empowers civic groups and individuals to have greater oversight capacity thus ensuring transparency and openness. Third, there is participative democracy which tends to create innovative institutions by expanding 'the opportunity for citizens to engage directly in different stages of the policy process and at different levels of public bureaucracy' (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012).

This paper offers a better alternative to exact accountability for poverty alleviation through the social accountability lens. Social accountability is not a specific type of accountability, but rather it is a particular approach for exacting accountability. There are diverse ways of conceptualizing social accountability. Some scholars tend to limit the definition of social accountability to monitoring activity only (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006). However, it is not monitoring only.

A World Bank report defines social accountability as

> ….. an approach to governance that involves citizens and civil society organizations (CSOs) in public decision-making and in holding governments accountable for its actions, especially with regard to the management of public resources (World Bank: 2011: 1).

From the above definition, a number of inferences can be drawn about the meaning and nature of social accountability. First, social accountability involves collective actions. Second, social accountability involves participation in both accountability (report cards, social audit, citizen charters etc) and in policymaking (participatory budgeting, participatory planning) (Joshi and Houtzager, 2012). Third, there are both demand and supply sides of social accountability. The supply side invokes the government to create institutions offering the scope to civic groups to monitor the actions of public officials and participate in policymaking. The demand side of social accountability politics implies the spontaneous emergence of the civic groups to ask for accountable behavior of public officials. Fourth, the role of the state is of paramount importance in making social accountability initiatives effective. As conceived by Blair, the state, being active or repressive can either accommodate, being indifferent or oppose social accountability initiatives of civic groups. The state's positive response to civic groups' demands ranges from championing the initiative to statutory endorsement. The passive response ranges from merely accepting the demands to crushing the movements engineered by civic groups (Blair, 2011). Fifth, the civic groups do not have the sanctioning authority. Rather, they "attempt to use political and reputational costs to push power holders to respond" (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006). They work through triggering traditional accountability mechanisms. For instance, they can instigate law makers to push for certain pro-poor legislation or go for public interest litigation to invoke action on the part of the judiciary. Sixth, there is a need to institutionalize the process of social accountability initiatives (Ackerman, 2004; Goetz and Jenkins, 2001).

Though the concept of social accountability is not new, its popularity has gained momentum with the development of the governance and good governance paradigms. However, the contemporary perspective of governance emphasizes on the plurality of the state incorporating multiple actors such as the public sector, the private sector and civil society, which are networked with each other through horizontal linkages (Chondhoke, 2003; Osborne and McLaughlin, 2002; Kim et. al., 2005; Keohane and Nye, 2000). Therefore, social accountability initiatives are an integral part of civil society which has already been mentioned as a current important domain in the process of governance. On

the other hand, social accountability is organized around three key elements such as transparency, accountability and participation which are again important indicators of good governance (World Bank, 2011). Poor people are the greatest beneficiaries of effective social accountability initiatives as they are the most reliant on government services and least equipped to hold government officials accountable (Malena et al., 2004).

The effectiveness of social accountability mechanisms depends on such factors as a favorable socio-political environment, state support of different kinds, an appropriate policy and legal frameworks, institutional strengths of civil society organizations and the institutionalization of social accountability initiatives (World Bank, 2011; Ackerman, 2004; Blair, 2011).

The political landscape is a critical factor in the analysis of social accountability initiatives though it is overlooked in the neo-liberal development paradigm. There is no doubt that the neo-liberal development paradigm feels comfortable with the market-friendly environment and devolution and working through non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Ahmad, 2008). However, social accountability and its significant role in poverty alleviation in the developing world cannot be devoid of the contextual variables such as the nature of the state, the dynamics of rural society and their interrelationships (Blair, 2011; Enrique, 2011b).

Based on the above conceptual review on the dimensions and institutions of social accountability, this study proposes the following social accountability framework (Figure 1). It displays the supply side actors and demand side players and presumes how their interventions may impact the degree of social accountability in a given context.

Poverty Alleviation and Social Accountability

Until recently, the discourse of poverty alleviation was basically state-centered. However, the modality of poverty reduction has changed significantly since the emergence of the governance and good governance models. The advent of the concept of good governance has opened a new horizon and vindicated the necessity of participation of civil society organizations in poverty alleviation programs. In the state-sponsored poverty alleviation programs in the developing world, three vices such as corruption, capture and clientelism are overwhelmingly dominant (Ackerman, 2005; Blind, 2011). Corruption by government officials, elite capture of the programs and channeling resources through patronage network are common phenomena. It is also evident that conventional state-centered accountability mechanisms have limited effectiveness in combating these vices (Azfar, 2007).

Under the situation narrated above, the role of society-based civic groups has become potentially indispensable to promote economic, social and political justice for the poor people. Citizens can establish rights by voicing against governmental injustices, express their needs, and demand between elections. Active citizen participation helps allocate resources properly, minimize corruption and engender demands (Malena et al, 2004).

According to Apusigah, social accountability combines "participatory monitoring of poverty with a process of empowering citizens to demand accountability from government for poverty reduction investments, while at the same time, supporting government (especially at local government levels) to improve its capacity to engage with citizens for the benefit of promoting reforms in poverty-targeted policies, budgets and programs" (Apusigah, 2009:13).

Although social accountability is beset with a strong theoretical back up and some success stories in the developing world (e.g. Public Expenditure Tracking Surveys in Uganda, Public Service Accountability Monitor (PSAM) in South Africa, Participatory Budget (PB) in Porto Alegre municipality in Brazil , civil society engagement in budget review in Gujarat, India, Ahmad, 2008; Wright et al., 2007; Azeem, 2006; World Bank, 2004), the socio-economic and political contexts may pose serious constraints in realizing the objectives of social accountability. Particularly, in the developing world extreme inequality, poverty, and undemocratic political situations pose considerable threats to the autonomous actions of social-actors-led civic organizations.

Poverty Situation in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the poverty-stricken countries in the world. In terms of human development index (HDI) and multidimensional poverty index, Bangladesh stands at very low level. As per HDI, Bangladesh's position is 146 of 186 countries (UNDP, 2013). The human development index is prepared based on a composite measure of some dimensions of human development: life expectancy, adult literacy and gross enrolment in education and purchasing power parity (PPP) income. The multidimensional poverty index, on the other hand, looks at the proportion of people experiencing a living condition below the edge in each of the HDI dimensions including - living a long and healthy life, having access to education, and a decent standard of living. So it focuses beyond income situation to capture a multi-dimensional alternative to the poverty measure of $1.25 a day (PPP US$). According to UNDP's 2013 Human Development Report, 54.4% of the population suffers from the intensity of deprivation, while 26.2% are severely poverty-stricken (UNDP, 2013). Therefore, poverty is at a grave stage in Bangladesh. Table 1 provides a comprehensive picture of poverty situation in the country. The table shows that the percentages of both absolute and hardcore poverty have decreased by a small margin between 1991 and 2005. It should be mentioned here that over the last two decades, government allocation to poverty alleviation programs has increased significantly. There are certain areas such as health, education, and child morality where there have been significant improvements. The most significant role in combatting poverty has been played by NGOs. With generous supports from the international donor agencies, NGOs' micro credit and other development services have had considerable impact on the rural poverty situation. However, given the number of poverty-stricken people, the decrease is not spectacular.

Figure 1 Theoretical Framework on Social Accountability
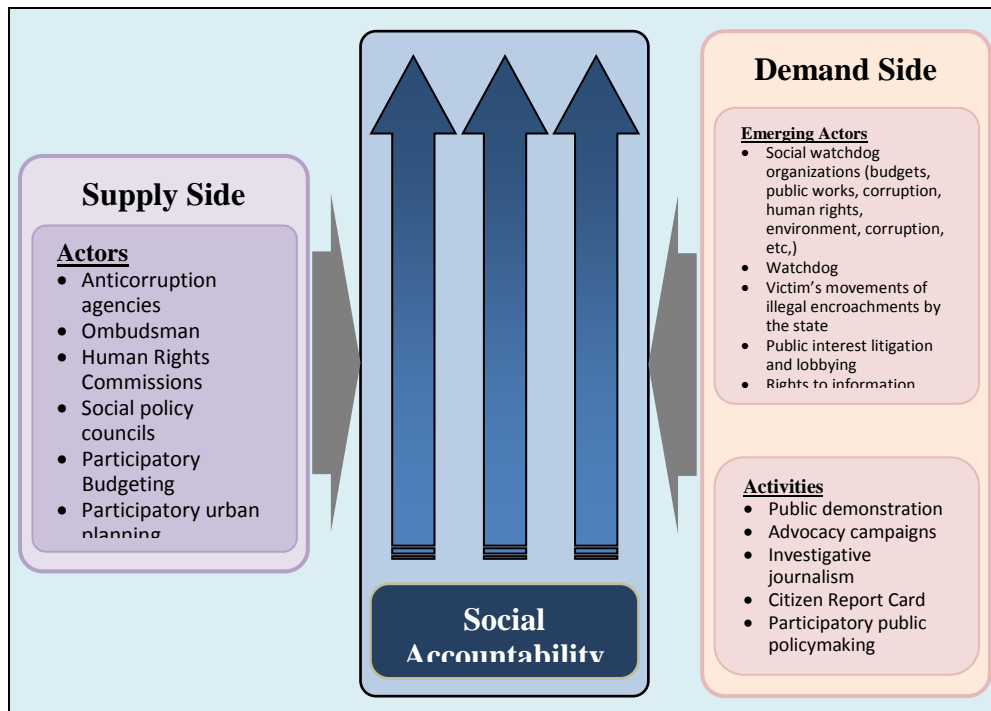
Source: Adapted from Enrique, 2011a.

While there are many measures of poverty, calorie intake has remained the most authentic one. Absolute poverty is measured based on calorie intake of less than 2122 kilocalorie per day by an adult where as hardcore poverty is calculated if an adult takes less than 1805 kilocalorie a day. There are other dimensions of poverty in Bangladesh. There is gender imbalance in poverty. Women are poorer than men. The hardcore poor are largely women. There is also regional variation. There are more poor people in Barisal and Rajshahi divisions than in Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet Divisions. Those living in remote and vulnerable areas like river banks, hilly areas, and certain groups of indigenous and disadvantaged population are more hard poverty-stricken than others. A large number of populations also suffer from chronic poverty (MoF, 2009; World Bank, 2008).

Table 1: Trends of Poverty

Survey Year	People below Poverty Line					
	National		Rural		Urban	
	People (in million)	People (%)	People (in million)	People (%)	People (in million)	People (%)
Poverty line 1: Absolute Poverty, Daily less than 2122 kilocalorie food intake						
2005	56.0	40.4	41.2	39.5	14.8	43.2
2000	55.8	44.3	42.6	42.3	13.2	52.5
1995-96	55.3	47.5	45.7	47.1	9.6	49.7
1991-92	51.6	47.5	44.8	47.6	6.8	46.7
Poverty line 2: Hardcore Poverty, Daily less than1805 kilocalorie food intake						
2005	27.0	19.5	18.7	17.9	8.3	24.4
2000	24.9	20.0	18.8	18.7	6.0	25.0
1995-96	29.1	25.1	23.9	24.6	5.2	27.3
1991 - 92	30.4	28	26.6	28.3	3.8	26.3

Source: Ministry of Finance (MoF) (2009). *Bangladesh Economic Review*. Dhaka: MoF, GoB.

Evidence of Social Accountability Initiatives in Poverty Alleviation programs

There is a plethora of anti-poverty government polices such as the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and poverty alleviation activities undertaken at the behest of government ministries/departments, local government bodies and NGOs. Some programs are relief-oriented, others are meant for economic empowerment. The food assisted program has remained one of the biggest poverty alleviation interventions in the country since the 1960s.

Though government policy papers (e.g. PRSP) very often emphasize on participation of the poor, it remains elusive. The formal structure of accountability is notoriously faulty. More importantly, downward accountability towards the beneficiaries is quite flawed as evident in several social service programs including poverty alleviation programs implemented at the village level. For instance, there is a provision for project implementation committee comprising representatives of the beneficiaries. Though there are formal committees, the beneficiaries' representatives are either conspicuously absent or kept powerless deliberately by an unholy coalition of project government officials and rural elites. Such participation is also absent in other areas. In their empirical studies Kabeer and Kabir (2009) have mentioned about popular participation in education and health services which are devoid of any meaningful participation of the target population. Therefore, the formal channel is not really supportive enough to downward accountability

and the failure of the government is evident. The government does not seem to be very keen either about citizen engagement and participation.

The role of civic society including NGOs in enforcing downward accountability is not very bright either. Definitely, NGOs have made substantial contribution to some areas such as health, non-formal primary education, and micro credit. The government has also involved some leading NGOs in the food for works (FFW) and some collaborative programs. The effectiveness of these programs is also well-documented. They have made some breathing space in breaking archaic structure of clientelism to some extent. There are some glimpses of social mobilization towards rights-based economic empowerment. It should be mentioned here that since many NGOs have undergone changes -from relief to service delivery - a few of them continue to focus on social mobilization on the basis of their understanding of inequality in society. Later again, many moved to microcredit and social services patronized by donors. Micro finance has become the dominant model of NGO operations. Some of them have combined micro finance with services such as health education, and nutrition. Remarkably, the lowest number is engaged in social mobilization activities. And as such social mobilization activities have significantly declined (White, 1999). For instance, the focus of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), the largest NGO in Bangladesh, is on economic empowerment following basically a market model through micro finance associated with other social services.

However, *Nijera Kori* (let us do ourselves) and *Samata* (equality) - two regional NGOs - have demonstrated the efficacy of social mobilization in exacting accountability from public officials. Both NGOs focus on collective activism to ensure the rights of the poor to different public service provisions. Along with encouraging members for thrift they follow a rights-based approach to economic empowerment. They use training and discussion within group meetings to promote collectivism reflecting on the structural roots of poverty and inequality in Bangladesh, This helps strengthen members' awareness of their rights as workers, peasants and citizens and mobilize them for taking collective action on issues of concern to them. Particularly, their mobilization of landless destitute in claiming rights in FFW, rural maintenance and the distribution of *khas* land (government-owned land) programs is praiseworthy (Devine, 2006; Kabeer and Kabir, 2009).

As per the legal provisions, landless poor are entitled to on *khas* (government-owned) land. Over the years, rural elites in collaboration with the land officials have grabbed lands illegally depriving the vast number of landless people in the country (IGS, 2010: 46). In a Northern district, rural elites occupied the *khas* lands for years. *Samata* came forward to mobilize the landless poor to claim their rights. During mobilization, landless poor people were tortured, raped, and implicated in false cases. But it did not stop the struggle of the landless to ensure their rights. After years of struggle they finally got the ownership.

A successful case of NGO activism for protecting the rights of landless peasants is recorded from Noakhali district in the south of Bangladesh. *Nijera Kori* came to Noakhali

char (a tract of land surrounded by the waters of a river or a sea) area for relief purpose. It found that there was a big chunk of *char* land declared as *khas* land for redistribution among the landless. However, local elites bared the landless to claim their rights. They were severely intimated and tortured by local elites with the aid of local hooligans recruited from the landless class bought with money. *Nijera kori* then started mobilizing the landless and apprised them of their rights and access to these *khas* lands. There were severe confrontations. Women also took an active part.

Collective activism of the poor people fostered by *Nijera Kori* and *Samata* was also manifested in the rural works and vulnerable group development (VGD) programs and other public services such as health and education. Women's groups were vocal against wage cuts and ghost roster of workers. Not necessarily they succeeded all the time as sometimes solidarity among the workers would wane or fellow workers would succumb to employers' threats or blandishments. From the narratives of several group members it is apparent that despite many odds, group mobilization enhanced better access to different public services meant for the poor (Knox, 2009; Kabeer and Kabir, 2009).

Local government functionaries have long been accused of corrupt practices. Instead of working as participatory institutions, they have been dens of closed clubs of rural elites. Since these local government offices are not financially viable they are fully dependent on central government for financial grants and delegated responsibilities such as managing FFW and other infrastructure development programs. There have been little efforts to involve the target groups in project management of different programs. Against this backdrop, the government launched a pilot project known as Sirajganj local government development fund (SLGDF) with financial assistance from the United Nations Capital Development Fund. The project rightly chose a lower level local government institutions as this had a better chance of experimenting with social accountability initiatives. The project incorporated several social accountability tools such participatory performance assessment exercises, participatory planning, open budget meetings, project scheme implementation, resource mobilization, and participation in various committees. There was representation from all walks of life including primary school teachers, religious leaders, family health workers, agriculture block supervisors, women members of NGOs and vulnerable groups, farmers (small and marginal), day laborers, social workers, and civil society.

For performance assessment, several parameters such as financial management, service delivery, female participation in decision-making, transparency, accountability, and overall governance of officials and the union p*arishads* (union council) were assessed by ordinary people with the aid of public score card. The budget process was quite transparent. The process began with displaying the draft budget on the notice board. Then on fixed dates, the annual income and expenditure statements of the local councils were presented along with the succeeding year's income and expenditure plan. Community members got the chance to review the budget, ask about different income and expenditure items, and suggest changes. This transparency helped local councils mobilize local resources. Participatory planning sessions were undertaken at the village level with participation of 120 to 400 ordinary villagers (30 – 40 women) facilitated by union and

ward committees. The participatory planning process employed such tools as social mapping, problem identification and prioritization, and action planning (Hassan and Sarker, 2010; CGG and World Bank, 2005).

The project introduced decentralized and performance-based budgeting. Funds were directly released to union *parishads*. Best performers were awarded special incentives in the form of additional funding on the basis of previous year's performance. Scheme notice boards and complaint books were also used. Notice boards were used to inform citizens about the source of funds, work involved, dates, those responsible, and costs. Data and information were also provided on the local council (annual plan, list of project schemes, funds received, minutes of meetings, budgets, and so on) was publicized on local council notice boards to inform citizens and receive complaints from them about the overall performance of the project. Complaint books were used to receive feedback from different stakeholders.

The outcomes of this sort of social accountability initiatives were impressive. Specific outcomes of the project include gaining trust of communities, accountable and transparent local councils, access of community members to local council decision making process, improved service delivery and better access to services by the rural poor, enhanced participation of women, reduced corruption, and optimal utilization of resources (Hassan and Sarker, 2010; Public Affairs Foundation et al, 2007).

There has been some success in empowering local people and grassroots institutions through donor-supported NGO initiatives. One such program was the USAID-sponsored Local Government Initiative that resulted in the formation and activism of local government associations, women councilor empowerment, policy demonstration (i.e. the RUPANTAR success in getting government to provide financial support to union parishads), local government coalitions, media campaign, policy research and so on. Notable performance was displayed by *Agrogoti Sangshtha* (Progress organization) in Satkhira and *Rupantar* (Transformation) in Khulna. *Agrogoti* has been working with local government bodies (union council) for many years and have developed a strategic focus on local government. Their down-to-earth working approach such as the open budget session, open union coordination meeting with villagers in the model of g*ram sabha* (village meeting) in West Bengal, India has been appreciated by local people as a way to promote citizen's participation, transparency and accountability (Agrogoti Sangstha, 2005, cited in Rahman, 2006). Khan Foundation and other donor program-supported networks of elected women members of local councils is another good example of empowering women councilors at local level. From an advocacy point of view, all these forums and networks lack research and advocacy skills and their mentors (i.e. Hunger Project, Khan Foundation) need better collaboration (Rahman, 2006).

In the past decade or so, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has been addressing corruption. It initiated the formation of a home-grown grassroots organization called Committees of Concerned Citizens (CCC) as a grassroots-based social movement against corruption. With its motto "Corruption increases poverty and injustice – Let's fight it together ….now", the TIB has been, among other things, supporting the CCCs in

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their activities of releases press release, reports and other publication on corruption and other public issues on a regular basis (Knox, 2009; Transparency International Bangladesh, 2012).

But the overall social accountability scenario is not promising. Owing to the lack of adequate social accountability instruments in place, there are both common belief and empirical evidence that government-sponsored poverty alleviation programs have not made substantive impact in Bangladesh. Corruption, mismanagement, and patronage distribution are the common phenomena that have engulfed all sectors in society, including the rural sector. The poor, supposedly real beneficiaries receive very little from the government poverty alleviation programs. Sobhan, for instance, has raised the issue of transaction costs relating to poverty alleviation programs (Sobhan, 1998). Sobhan's remarks point mostly to food for work (FFW) programs. Other areas of government intervention such as micro credit, cash-wage works program, and other social sectors such as health, sanitation and education have been inundated by corruption and mismanagement (IGS, 2007; Kabeer et al, 2010; Sarker and Rahman, 2007). Sobhan has also aptly observed that government programs for poverty alleviation remain "notorious for their top–down approach to designing projects and their incapacity in involving the poor in the management of them" (Sobhan, 1998).

State, Social Accountability and Poverty Alleviation in Bangladesh: An Analysis

Social accountability initiatives are not isolated phenomena. They are closely related to the dynamics of the state structure, the policy process and the dynamics of society. They revolve around the state-society relationship. Though Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, a stable and democratic political process has not emerged. Over the last decade or so corruption in politics and administration has reached an unprecedented level. In fact, Bangladesh was ranked as the most corrupt for five consecutive years according Transparency International (Kabeer and Kabir, 2009). It is hard to find any sector without corrupt practices (IGS, 2008). In the political sphere, dysfunctional democracy is prevalent with the absence of the main opposition party in the parliamentary proceedings. Confrontation politics has replaced healthy political competition between the winning and the losing party. The winning party takes it for granted that it has absolute monopoly over the state apparatus (Osman, 2010). There is also prevalence of criminalization of politics. Many law makers of both the ruling and the opposition party are implicated in criminal cases. The worrying part is, the criminal elements of the ruling party enjoy immunity from the law enforces and the judiciary for their criminal actions (Choudhury, 2012). Formal mechanisms of accountability do not simply work resulting in unaccountable governance in all spheres of society (Osman, 2010). Major institutions responsible for exacting accountability are manned by those loyal to the ruling party. All major integrity institutions are being run along the partisan approach (Daily Star, 2011). Clientelism has become a norm rather than an exception in running the public sphere. Wood (2000) traces the root of clientelism to the deep structures of society. Public service provisions are managed through a network of clientelist relationships stretching from the central state level to the village level.

The situation of the poor is quite precarious in the society. There are no systematic channels through which the poor people can convey their demands. Their needs and demands are hardly reflected in the public policy process. "The policy process itself is weak (adhoc, centralized, frequently personality-driven) and the character of contemporary party politics makes little space for competition over poverty policy." (Hossain and Ali, 2006: 3). Therefore, the issue of mobilization of the poor remains an intriguing issue in Bangladesh so far their entitlements to rural public provisions are concerned. The democratization of the state and the democratization of society are intertwined (White, 1999). There is no denying the fact that there are deep-rooted barriers of clientelism in that the poor people are afraid "of the loss of such patronage, and the modicum of security it offers, have profound implications on the capacity of subordinate groups to express voice on their own behalf and to exercise political agency in pursuit of their rights" (Kabeer and Kabir (2009). Along with this, there are some additional factors that may compound the problem of mobilization of the poor for rights-based approach to development: fear of repression by the state, the failure of the leftist political parties, the neutralizing effect of many development programs of the government on the propensity of the poor to politically organized way of protesting the government and the apparent mind-set of ordinary citizens to look at the state as a provider of welfare goods and services rather than a protector and facilitator of civic and political rights (Hossain, 2009a; Ali and Hossain, 2006).

The onus is now on associational groups such as civil society organizations who can help the downtrodden to voice their concerns on poverty alleviation and other state services. It has been discussed that NGOs have been playing an important role in poverty alleviation. But over the years their role has undergone significant changes. NGOs are more comfortable to work more with development services than with rights-based approach to development (Hossain, 2006; White, 1999; Kabeer et al, 2009; Kabeer and Kabir, 2009). It also depends on the political space defined as the types and range of possibilities present for pursuing poverty reduction by the poor or on behalf of the poor by local organizations" (Rahman, 2006). Institutional channels and political discourse are the two important elements of political space through which the poor or NGOs representing the poor can get their voices heard and enforce entitlements (Rahman, 2006). Though there is a legal framework for NGO activities in Bangladesh, political space for their activities is not well-defined.

> Although highly critical of the government, initially, and loudly vocal in questioning the power structures at rural, urban and national levels, NGOS have undergone a paradigm shift in their preference to work with the system rather than oppose it. Political space, therefore, in the sense of social mobilization and social activism has been negotiated by both the state and NGOS (IGS, 2008: 119).

In the context of this political space, the question remains, what sort of role the state is playing in relation to social accountability initiatives for poverty alleviation. While government policy papers make so many commitments in relation to participation of the poor in development programs, very little have been done in realizing this objective. We

have discussed a few cases which reveal the involvement of NGOs and community groups in exacting accountability and the results are quite satisfactory. The case of the SLGDF project also provides enough evidence that local government offices can be very good outlets to involve community groups in the service delivery system. The success of decentralized governance in Kerala India further vindicates the long standing aspiration of ensuring popular participation in the rural service delivery system (Heller, et al, 2007). Here the role of the state is very crucial. Looking at the spectrum of state support for social accountability initiatives (Blair, 2011), the Bangladesh state appears to be occasionally repressive and mostly indifferent. On Blair's continuum of state response, Bangladesh stands somewhere close to between indifference and opposition rather than between indifference and accommodation. It also has provided passive rather than active support for social accountability for poverty alleviation. It is passive in the sense that the state has accepted the fact that civil society is an important part of governance and given consent to monitoring the performance of local officials by community groups. But we do not find the Bangladesh state playing the role of the champion of social initiative (PB in Brazil, decentralized governance in Kerala, India) or providing active state, backing or encouragement (MKSS and PAC in India). The success in India and Brazil also reveal that the states made relevant reforms to create space for civil society to perform social accountability functions and implemented reform agenda with strong will and sincerity (Hossain, 2009b). The Right to Information (RTI) Act in India is a case in point. The legislation and enforcement of this act paved the way for MKSS to exact accountability of local public officials. The question remains whether adequate reform measures and their proper implementation have been undertaken in Bangladesh. The example of local government ordinance is a glaring example which is adequate enough to stifle the dream of decentralized local governance in Bangladesh. The elected *upazila parishad* is virtually toothless given the advisory role accorded to the local Member of Parliament. Moreover, adequate provisions are absent regarding downward accountability of government officials who are on deputation to work at the *upazila* level (Sarker, 2012).

Bangladesh has failed to achieve an effective form of devolved local governance. Absence of political commitment and bureaucratic aversion are seen as the key reasons for weak local governance. Ironically, the military regimes that seized power from time to time made more attempts to strengthen and democratize local government structures than have the popularly elected governments. Local government reforms have suffered the most from anti-democratic policies during the periods of democratic rule (1971-1975, 1991-2006, 2009-2010). With regard to local government reform, Bangladesh continues in the midst of transition both in terms of public interest articulation and policy response. There remain many problems on both supply and demand sides of reform constituencies. The dominant political forces from the supply side, despite continued strong rhetoric for strengthening local government, now look more resistant to reform than in the recent past. Even those who argue a new agenda about reform options (the present government and its coalition partners) are not advancing a democratic perspective of change (Thomas and Rahman, 2011).

The Bangladesh government also enacted the Right to Information Act in 2009. The Act itself is the result of the movements of civil society and the electoral pledge of the ruling

party. The government has also constituted the Information Commission. It has been somewhat actively channeling information through its website on various rights. However the Commission has been conducting only public awareness camps and providing training to civil servants (Information Commission Bangladesh, 2013). However, the real challenge remains in the implementation of the Act as the notorious Official Secrets Act, 1923 still prevails in spite of continuous campaign by civil society groups to repeal it (Daily Star, 2006)

Given the magnitude of bad governance in Bangladesh, doubts are mounting whether the real intensions of the law could be translated into fruition by making poverty alleviation policies and programs transparent and ensuring rights-based approach to development for the poor. Contemporary and past evidence of extensive politicization of key institutions such as judiciary, civil administration, law enforcement agencies, and anti-corruption and information commission corroborates the apprehension that mere legislation is not enough for ensuring transparency in development programs (Iftekharuzzaman, 2009: 10).

The civil society organizations have not placed any substantial role. Serious concerns were raised about the way PRSP was prepared in 2005 and revised later on without any meaning participation of civil society. The document was prepared by local consultants. The consultation process was led by a large NGO. There were twenty two consultations with wider society including one with the representatives of donor agencies. There were apprehensions that whether inputs received from civil society was reflected at all in the document (CPD, 2004; Kamruzzaman, 2007). More importantly, this vital policy framework was never discussed in the national parliament. This is another indicator of the negligence of poverty issues by national parliament.

As against the study framework of the institutional channels of supply-demand space (as proposed in Figure 1), the social accountability actors and mechanisms vis-à-vis poverty alleviation are rather weak in Bangladesh. Social watchdog organizations are not yet organized and rights to litigation campaigns are infrequent, if not absent. As against the large NGOs, who are now driven more by their income generation motives, the small, local social NGOs such as *Nijera Kori* and *Samata* are more active on many fronts of social accountability including advocacy and public demonstration. However, citizen report card and public participation in budget and other local/central decisions are still at the civil society discourse agendas rather than in practice, although the UNDP/UNCDF Sirajganj local government strengthening project, based on its best practice in 'citizen report card' has attempted for country-wide replication (GoB, UNDP, UNCDF, 2007).

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, an attempt has been made to ascertain the importance of social accountability and its implications for poverty alleviation programs in the developing world in general and Bangladesh in particular. It has been argued that social accountability as a discourse has gained currency in recent years. Its practical implications are also widely acclaimed. The emergence of social accountability as an important construct is not sudden. Though formal state-centered accountability

mechanisms have an important role to play in enforcing public accountability, their limitations cannot also be ignored. Particularly for poverty alleviation programs, their impact is not without doubt. Similarly, the market choice approach to accountability has its limitations too for poverty alleviation programs. Against this backdrop, focus has now shifted to social accountability initiatives which have opened a new vista for enforcing accountability of public officials dealing with poverty alleviation. In fact, there is a large number of social accountability initiatives now found in different parts of the developing world. Civic organizations have become victorious on many occasions in protecting the lawful rights of the underprivileged. Their forceful participation has contributed enormously in incorporating the preferences of the poor people in policy planning, implementation and monitoring of development programs at the local level.

Bangladesh is one of the impoverished countries in the world. Poverty has been endemic over the years. Successive governments have undertaken numerous poverty alleviation programs to ameliorate the living conditions of the rural poor. Despite these efforts, poverty situation has not improved substantially. The government of Bangladesh is one of the signatories to MDGs. As such, the government has developed comprehensive strategies to grapple with the grave poverty situation. However, the administration of poverty alleviation programs poses problems. The bulk of the poverty alleviation programs are being administered without fruitful participation of the rural poor. Civic groups have also failed to generate enough pressures on rural development officials and rural elite-dominated local councils to ensure justice to the rural poor. While the bulk of the poverty alleviation programs do not accrue benefits to the rural poor, there are some glimpses of hope in some programs regarding participation of civic groups and beneficiaries. Participation of NGOs in distributing *khas* land and monitoring the distribution of VGD cards among the rural poor has further reinforced the importance of social accountability in poverty alleviation programs.

While there are some success stories, in most poverty alleviation programs there is no effective participation of the rural poor. There are some intriguing issues here. First, the prevailing socio-economic and political dynamics pose stupendous barriers to the development of effective pro-poor civic groups. A chain of dependency exists between the poor and the rural elites and the rural elites and state decision makers. The whole gamut of the relationship is dictated by prevailing clientelist politics. Second, the role of the state is a crucial factor in promoting social accountability initiatives. It has been found that political commitment (McCourt, 2003) has remained very shaky in Bangladesh. In the case of SLGDF project there was support from the part of the government. But it should be mentioned here that the role of the international development agencies that were monitoring the project was also an important factor. Third, the role of the civic groups particularly, traditional NGOs, has not been substantive. Though there are some collaborative projects where NGOs have played crucial roles in enforcing social accountability, the NGO community has also been incorporated within the clientelist network (Wood, 2000).

It is to be said that the civil society organizations and NGOs have not lived up to expectations, given their strength and long existence in Bangladesh. Compared to the

cross-cultural examples cited in this paper (e.g. participatory budgeting in Gujarat, India; MKSS in Karnataka, India; PPA in Ghana; Social Weather Station in the Philippines), Bangladesh could not make a mark as a bold example in protecting people's rights in poverty alleviation programs. On the contrary, the state has failed to become a champion in ensuring social accountability or even to strongly support citizens in giving them a broader space to article their voice.

The success of social accountability initiatives also depends on the internal configuration civic groups and their ability to attract new members and mobilize them around social causes and sway initiatives. Internal strife, undemocratic elements within the groups, clientelist nexus with state decision makers and the absence of a visionary leader may impair their power. . However, In order to succeed, civil society organizations and state functionaries need to work in together. It is a flawed approach to depend exclusively on state horizontal mechanisms since there are possibilities of failure. Similarly, civil society organizations cannot be exclusively relied upon as they may have internal dysfunctions or their efforts could be upset by the state. Therefore, a collaborative relationship has to be established based on mutual trust for extracting best results in the public accountability regime. And ultimately, that could contribute substantially in improving the performance of poverty alleviation programs in Bangladesh.

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