

## Effectiveness of Public Hearing in Bangladesh: Complainers Experience and Institutional Response

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### Abstract

*Public hearing is one of the key instruments of social accountability mechanism which has brought some positive impact for the citizens of Bangladesh. It ensures the accountability of government agencies through citizen engagement. Public hearings enable citizens to confront leaders of service-providing government agencies about their promises and obligations, which improves and sustains the quality of services. This paper is based on mixed-method using service receiver surveys, institutional surveys and in-depth interviews. The study has found that public hearing has some positive outcomes in making service providers accountable and improving the service provisions. However, it has also certain procedural and institutional challenges, and successful public hearings need the support of the political leadership, local elites, local administration.*

**Key Words:** Public Hearing, Anti-Corruption Commission, Bangladesh.

### Introduction

Public hearing is one of the important instruments of social accountability mechanisms. It has become an effective tool to improve service provisions and combat corruption by creating social accountability of service providers. Legal and policy frameworks of Bangladesh support accountable, responsive and corruption-free public services. The constitution [Article 7(1)] of Bangladesh stipulates that all powers in the Republic belong to the people. Also, the Seventh Five Year Plan 2016 – 2020 (GoB, 2015) and National Integrity Strategy underscore the need to provide services free of corruption and establish feedback and grievance redress system (GoB, 2012). But, unfortunately, the National Household Survey on Corruption 2015 shows that 67.8 per cent of households experienced corruption while receiving services from different public and private services. The survey found the passport, law enforcement, education, BRTA, land services as the most corrupt services (TIB, 2016). In this context, the Cabinet Division issued a circular on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2014 to conduct a public hearing for improving integrity and

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preventing corruption in public offices.<sup>4</sup> Equipped with these mandates, the Seventh Five Year Plan (2016 - 2020) of the ACC highlighted the importance of public hearing in ensuring corruption-free public service delivery. Realizing its efficacy in curbing corruption and improving service provisions, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) started holding a public hearing on different public service provisions in December 2014. Therefore, the main objective of the study is to assess the effectiveness of ACC's public hearing through exploring the complainer experience and responses of government institutions according to the public hearing.

### **Public hearing as social accountability tools: Conceptual clarity**

Over the last few decades, the idea of governance has been evolving. Once it empathized on technocratic measures to improve government effectiveness and develop legal framework for market-oriented development. However, the problem was that sometimes institutions were taken over by corrupt political networks, self-serving bureaucrats and other interest groups and economic inefficiency, corruption and arbitrary rule in developing countries mushroomed. In this context, the next phase of governance thinking emphasized on civic participation and social inclusion (Sundaram and Chowdhury, 2012). Thus, social accountability has evolved as a process to check the performance of government officials, politicians and service providers through civic engagement (Ahmed, 2017).

The conventional hierarchy-based accountability mechanisms have increasingly become ineffective to hold government officials and service providers accountable. To overcome the ineffectiveness of the traditional hierarchy-based accountability mechanisms, various forms of social accountability have been developed and practised over the past decades. Different social accountability mechanisms have brought about lights of hope for the common citizen in many countries (Islam, Nasrullah and Haq 2018). There are several tools of social accountability, of which the following are considered to be important: community scorecard, social audit, public budget tracking system, citizen report card, public hearing and town hall meeting (CBGA, 2012). Public hearing, is a social accountability tool, a multi-stakeholder formal process where aggrieved service recipients raised specific deviances in service delivery provisions that prompt service providers to take corrective measures.

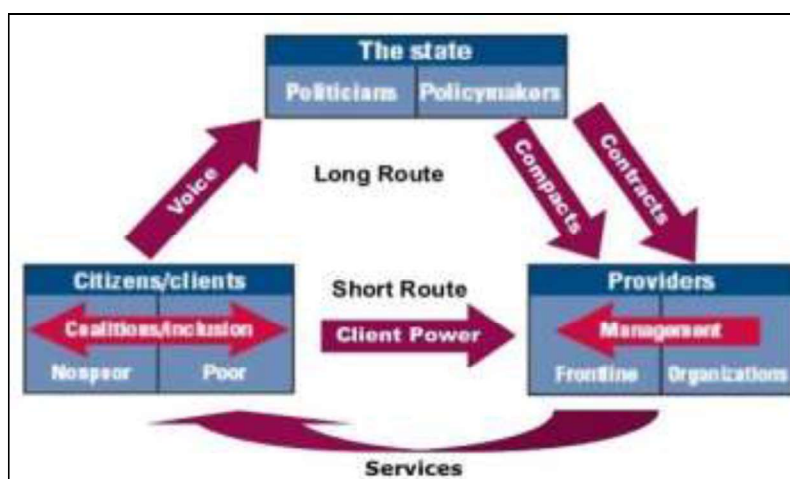
Economist Hirschman (1970) combining economic and political dimensions gave a theory about the remedial on the decline of goods and services. The model is known as *Exit* and *Voice*. The basic concept of the model is; customers have essentially two possible responses when they perceive that an organization is demonstrating a decline in quality or benefit to customers. They can *exit* through withdrawal from the goods and services; or, they can raise their voice to repair or improve the services through the communication of complaints, grievances or proposals for changes. *Exit* works well in private provision when there are substitutes and high quality-elasticity to demand prevails

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<sup>4</sup> Letter issued on 1 June 2014, Cabinet Division, The Government of Bangladesh

i.e customers are quality conscious. In such conditions, due to the effect of the ‘*invisible hand*<sup>5</sup>’, the firms or organizations try to improve goods and services to avoid losing of customers or market share. *Voice* works when there is a monopoly; and thus, customers have little or no scope to withdraw. In such a condition, customers need to raise their voices to repair the services. *Voice* works well when customers with higher consumer surplus actively participate to recuperate a service (Hirschman, 1970). Thus, in line with the *voice* component, several tools (public hearing, report card surveys, community scorecards, face the public, social audit etc.) have been practised across the world to recuperate goods and services from a decline by building accountability of service providers through civic participation.

In a Weberian state mechanism, politician and policymakers implement their agenda through service-providing organizations and frontline managers. Politicians and policymakers hold frontline managers accountable through some formal and informal rules. However, because of gaps in formal and informal rules and prevailing norms and behaviours in society, sometimes policymakers and frontline managers are motivated by their self-interest and thus are engaged in collusive practices. In those cases, people can only make the policy-makers accountable in the long run through demonstrating their concerns and displeasure in the general election. In such a context, social accountability tools can make frontline managers accountable in the short run to improve public services which are shown in the figure-1 (World Bank, 2004).



**Source:** Making Services Work for Poor People, The World Development Report 2004

According to the Principal-Agent theory, policy-makers or supervisors (principle) expect that public officials (agents) would help them to attain their pronounced goal. However, public officials sometimes indulge in corruption and other deviances sometimes because

<sup>5</sup> According to Adam Smith, whenever there is a perfect competition the *invisible hand* works to make goods and services efficient to the benefit of customers, Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (1776).

of their self-interest; and supervisors (principle) sometimes fail to detect those deviances for the information asymmetry that prevails among themselves. Thus, social accountability tools can help to reduce information asymmetry that prevails between policy-makers or supervisors and public officials, so that policy-makers can detect public officials' deviances and thereby make them accountable. On the other hand, economist Becker (1968) mentioned that self-interested public officials seek out bribes so long as the expected gain from corruption accedes the expected cost. In this view, he stated that one of the ways through which corruption can be mitigated is through increasing the probability of detection. Therefore, social accountability tools can help to reduce information asymmetry between policymakers and frontline managers and increase the detection of corruption. Moreover, social accountability can strengthen the relations between government and citizens and can contribute to improving the process of delivering public services to the people, fostering efficiency, transparency and accountability within public institutions and exposing government failure and corruption (UNDP 2010). The government, however, has to create a positive and enabling environment for citizens to the success of the social accountability mechanism. There are four conditions to create this enabling environment for social accountability to succeed: organized and capable citizen groups; government champions who are willing to engage; context and cultural appropriateness; and access to information (ANSA-EAP 2017).

## Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative research techniques were applied in this study. The quantitative technique involves two surveys – complainers survey and institutions survey, and key informant interviews. The complainers survey interviewed people who raised complaints at the public hearings and the institutional survey interviewed concerned authority/officials at institutions on which people raised complaints.

Up to December 2016, the ACC had conducted 35 public hearings- of which 1 was in 2014, 5 in 2015 and 29 in 2016. 17 public hearings were considered for the study giving six months' gestation periods to allow institutions enough time to solve or address raised complaints. However, the contact information on the 4 public hearings was not found available. Thus, 13 public hearings (detail in Table 1) were considered for the study. In total, 299 participants raised complaints and 59 public officials of different offices attended in 13 public hearings covered by this study.

**Table 1:** Number of public hearing by years, organizers and locations

Year		Organizers		Location		
2015	2016	ACC & TIB	ACC	Upazila	District	Dhaka Metropolitan
5	8	5	8	9	1	3
Total = 13		Total = 13		Total = 13		

Source: Author

Finally, the complainer survey collected interviews with 195 aggrieved persons out of 299 complainers. Regarding the institutional survey, interviews were conducted with 51

institutions out of the targeted 59 institutions. Some targeted respondents in the complaint survey could not be interviewed because of the wrong address, phone number etc. Thus, it can be said that the surveys were sorts of census with some non-responses. Two different structured questionnaires were used for collecting data from both surveys. Analyzing the background of public hearing attendants who participated in the survey, it is found that 66.7 per cent were from rural areas and 33.3 per cent from urban areas. Regarding sex, it is found that 7.8 per cent were female and 92.2 per cent male. Among the survey participants, majority of them belong to age groups 20-30 (6.3%), 31-40 (19.2), 41-50 (25.3%), 51-60 (24.7%) and 61+ (24.2%).

On the other hand, some qualitative techniques were applied to collect information for the study including key informant interviews and cases studies. Key interviews were done with a Commissioner of ACC, Deputy Commissioners (DC), Additional Deputy Commissioners (ADC), Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs), the concerned supervisory authority at the district level, ACC officials at district and Upazila levels, members of Corruption Prevent Committees, a representative of the World Bank and TIB's CCC members. Different checklists were used for conducting these key informant interviews and case studies. The indirect sources of information include relevant books, laws, circulars and different documents.

One of the major limitations of the research is that the survey with complaint raisers could not be done with all the participants. In 13 public hearings, around 299 participants attended, of those 195 could be reached for the questionnaire survey. The remaining 165 participants could not be reached because of the absence of participants' detailed contact information including cell numbers.

### **An overview of public hearings conducted by ACC in Bangladesh**

As per Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Act, 2004, the ACC is mandated to prevent corruption. According to the Act, corruption prevention has seven dimensions that include *inter alia* raising mass awareness, promoting integrity and identifying the sources of corruption. ACC's public hearings on different institutions serve all these dimensions in varying degrees. Thereby, the ACC conducts public hearings as a social accountability tool aiming at promoting transparency and accountability of public institutions and combating corruption. The Corruption Prevention Committees (CPCs)<sup>6</sup> constituted by the ACC and TIB's Committees of Concerned Citizens (CCCs) at districts and *Upazilas* have been helping it to conduct public hearings. The World Bank and JICA have given financial resources for their implementation.

Thus, embolden with the different legal and policy frameworks, the ACC started to conduct a public hearing on public service provisions from 15 December 2014 to curb

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<sup>6</sup> According to the ACC policies, each district and metropolitan Corruption Prevention Committee comprises 13 members and a Upazila Corruption Prevention Committee comprises nine members. One-third of the members are women. One President, two Vice-Presidents and a General Secretary are nominated by the members of the committee.

corruption and improve public services. Up to December 2016, the ACC had conducted public hearings on AC Land offices, Sub-registry Offices, Rural Electrification Board (REB), RAJUK, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), Department of Immigration and Passport (DIP) etc. at both local and central level.

The public hearings conducted at Upazila and district levels were attended by major public services. They include AC Land offices, Sub-registry Offices, Settlement Offices, Rural Electrification Board (REB), health complexes etc. The public hearings in Dhaka Metropolitan City were on RAJUK, Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), Department of Immigration and Passport (DIP). The reasons for selecting these institutions are that they have been believed to be infested with corruption from where a large number of citizens receive services and they are very essential for ensuring human development and citizens' well-being.

## **Research finding and Discussion**

### ***Effectiveness of public hearing***

The effectiveness of hearing depends on multiple factors including active participation of the participants, positive nod and commitment of the concerned authority against whom the complaints were raised, the environment of the hearing session to read out complaints, institutional responses, etc. Findings of the research are presented through synthesising information from two surveys done with the complainers and authorities, and key informant interviews. The findings showed that public hearing helps the *principals* (government) to make accountable the *agent* (public officials/concerned authorities) and take initiatives to detect their deviances. Moreover, public hearing is also effective for the citizens since it enables them to raise complaints against the service providers or concerned authorities and make them accountable in the short route to improve public services. As public officials are the only service provider, customers (citizens) *voices* through public hearings can repair the services.

### ***Submission, raising and nature of complaints***

One of the key elements of a public hearing is to raise complaints on service delivery provisions. The complaints made the concerned institutions accountable that eventually created a space to resolve raised complaints and initiate institutions response to prevent recurrence of those problems again. For this purpose, the ACC asks service recipients to put their complaints into designated complaint boxes usually installed at District Commissioner (DC) or Upazila Nirbahee Officer (UNO) office and headquarter of the particular institution. Organizers receive complaints before the hearing event so that they can invite concerned institutions or authorities to ensure their presence and give their responses to the complaints. After proper scrutiny, a certain number of complaints are allowed to be presented at a public hearing event. The purpose of the scrutiny is to avoid duplication, validity and cogency. Moreover, some complaints are encouraged to raise instantly at a hearing session.

### ***Modes of complaints submission***

Out of 299 targeted participants who participated in the public hearings 65.2 per cent (195) could be reached through this survey - of which 66 per cent submitted their complaints before the public hearing in the written form in their respective designated complaint box and the remaining 34 per cent submitted their complaints on the day of the public hearing session.

### ***Submission of complaints before the public hearing***

The study found that majority of the complaints in 13 public hearings were raised before the hearing event. In response to the question-how complainers submitted their complaints, it is found that a considerable percentage of complaints was (66%) submitted in designated complaint boxes before the scheduled time. The remaining complaints (34%) were submitted during hearing sessions.

### ***Getting the opportunity to voice complaints during hearing sessions***

The study found the environment in the hearing events was very conducive and friendly to voice complaints. This was adequately demonstrated as almost all complainers got the opportunity to read out their complaints. According to survey findings, an overwhelming percentage of complainers (96%) could read out their complaints at the public hearing events. Only a few complainers (i.e., 4%) could not do so for some unavoidable reasons like the eruption of a scuffle between complainers and opponent parties/quarters, shortage of time, a similar type of complaints were raised beforehand etc.

However, there were few instances where complainers were persuaded not to voice their complaints. It was observed that some public officials approached complainers beforehand and prevent them to raise their complaints with the promise of solving or settling the problem within a short time.

### ***Deliberation status of complaints at hearing sessions***

Raising complaints against public officials during a public hearing is a matter of courage and a new experience for service recipients as well. Despite this, the study found that an incredible percentage of complainers (85.9%) could raise or read out their complaints fully.

There were few instances where complainers were interrupted at the time of raising their complaints. However, no corrective measures were taken to prevent those interruptions. Moreover, once a public hearing session was postponed due to scuffle and chaos among the complainers, aggrieved quarters and concerned authority. Thus, the remaining complainers missed their opportunity to present complaints.

### ***Raising of complaints without fear***

A very high percentage of complainers who attended the hearing programmes could voice their complaints without fear and favour. According to the complainer survey, 94

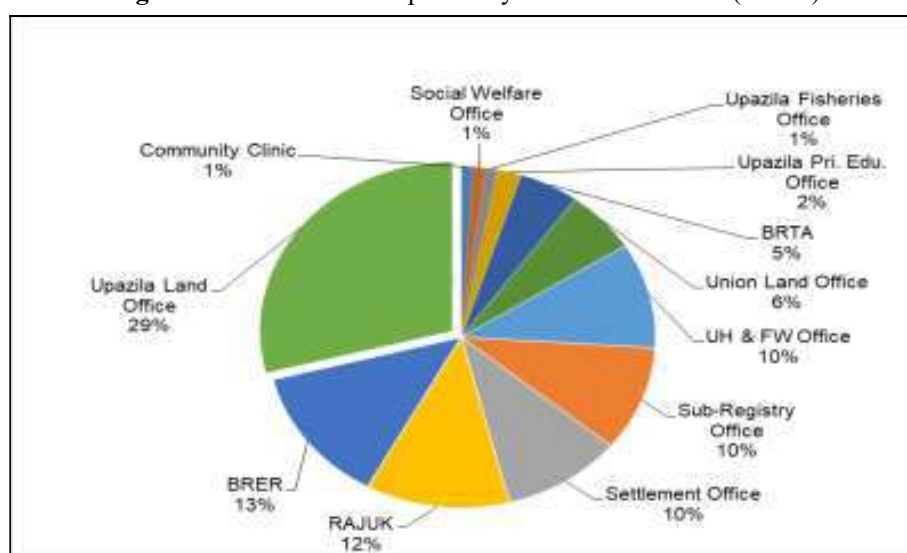
per cent of complainers could raise their complaints during the public hearing programmes without fear.

The reasons for which complainers feared to raise complaints include pessimism about getting the solution on the problem after the hearing, scare about the authority, risks of experiencing harassment afterwards from concerned authority, pressure from local political leaders and influential people.

### ***Complaints raised against institutions and officials***

The survey findings reveal that complainers in 13 public hearings made complaints against diverse institutions and individuals. The majority of the complaints were made

**Fig. 1:** Distribution of complaints by offices/institutions (n=195)



Source: Author

against institutions and individuals involved in land services (67%). Among land offices, the majority of complaints were against Upzilla Land Offices (29%). Other notable institutions against which complaints made complaints include BREB<sup>7</sup> (13%), RAJUK<sup>8</sup> (12%), health services (10%). (please see figure No. 1).

### ***Nature of the complaints***

Analysing the types of complaints, it was found the most common types of complaints were bribery; harassment of the complainer by a section of public officials, negligence of duties of public officials; unlawful behaviour of the public official's fraudulence and unlawful behaviour. In the land sector, most complaints were relating to illegal occupation or grabbing of land with illegal documents and muscle power. Health service-related complaints centred on the negligence of duties by doctors and other service

<sup>7</sup> Bangladesh Rural Electrification Board.

<sup>8</sup> Rajdhani (Capital city of Bangladesh) Unnayan Kotripokha (RAJUK)



providers, scarcity of medicine and bribe paid for receiving services at hospitals. Major complaints against REB services include delays in giving electricity connections for households and bribes paid for getting services. Regarding the services of RAJUK, the dominant complaints made by complainers were the occupation of plots by illegal means, not getting of plots allotted by RAJUK. The BRTA<sup>9</sup> related complaints were mostly related to bribery experienced by the complainers.

### **Resolutions of complaints**

#### ***Decisions delivered on complaints during hearing events***

Public hearing is a platform through which ordinary service recipients raised complaints on service deviations of service provisions so that institutions can take remedial measures to solve raised problems. The survey findings of the complainer survey reveal that the majority of the complainers got decisions or commitments during hearing events from concerned authority against which complaints were raised.

It is observed that among the complainers who got the decision on raised complaints, 69 per cent received commitments to solve the problems from concerned authorities. Other notable solutions include the setting of deadlines for the solutions of the complaints (15%) and an order given by the ACC to conduct an inquiry on the allegations by concerned authorities (19%).

#### ***Reasons for getting no commitment to the solution during public hearings***

According to the complainer survey, 22 per cent of complainers did not receive any promise for resolving their problem. The most prominent reason for which some complaints did not receive commitment include authority did not take the complaint seriously (51%), beyond the jurisdiction of concerned authorities (11%) and negligence of authorities (9%).

#### ***Authorities' initiatives to solve complaints***

It is found that after the public hearings authorities took encouraging initiatives to solve complaints. For almost two-thirds (72%) of the complaints, concerned authorities took the initiative to solve them. The most notable measures taken by authorities include concrete measures taken to solve the complaints, setting of deadlines for the resolutions of complaints and orders given to conduct inquiries as per the directives given by the ACC.

#### ***Status of complaints solved after public hearings***

One of the aims of public hearing events is to create a space for resolving raised complaints. If complaints are solved, creating social accountability through public hearing would pronounce and participants' trust in the effectiveness of public hearing would enhance. This study shows an encouraging picture of responses made by

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<sup>9</sup> Bangladesh Road Transport Authority.

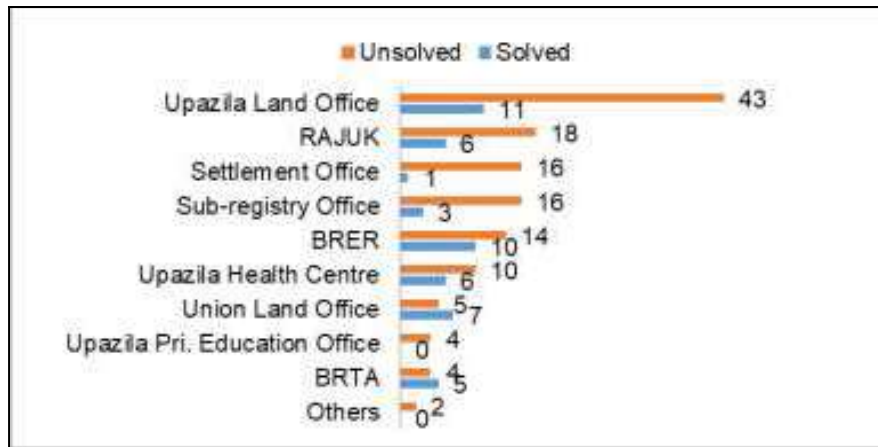
concerned authorities. According to the complainers' survey, the majority of the complainers (78.0%) got commitment or assurance to solve the problems during the hearing sessions. Afterwards, about one-third of the complainers (27.2%) said that they got solutions on their complaints afterwards and around one-tenth (14.0%) were under process. However, more than half of the complaints (59%) remained unsolved up to the survey period.

The survey findings reveal that complainers received solutions because of the active measures taken by concerned authorities. There were instances where complainers got back bribe money paid to certain public officials.

### ***Status of complaints solved by institutions***

According to the complainer survey, most of the unsolved complaints were relating to land services. Empirically, 43 complaints raised against Upazila Land Offices remained unsolved out of 54 complaints. Similarly, RAJUK could not solve 18 complaints out of 24 complaints. Only small numbers of complaints against Settlement Offices (1 out of 17) and Sub-registry Offices (3 out of 19) were solved. The number of solved complaints was found higher than the unsolved complaints in cases of Union land office and BRTA.

**Fig. 2:** Status of complaints solved by institutions (n=181)



Source: Author

### ***Reasons for complaints unresolved after a public hearing***

The major reasons for which no solution on the complaints observed include non-cooperation from concerned authorities (69%), inability or refusal to pay bribe as demanded by authorities (27%) and lack of initiatives by authorities (24%). In view of non-response on complaints, a complainer opined that 'authorities do not bother complaints raised in the public hearing'.

While discussing with the key informants it was evident that it had been possible for concerned authorities to ignore promises due to lack of process tracking or monitoring on the progress of the commitments given at public hearing events. It is also alleged that a

section of public officials made commitments to appease ACC officials attending the events, they were not willing to implement those promises.

### **Post-public hearing experiences by Complainers**

#### ***Difficulties experienced by complainers***

The empirical information of this study reveals that complainers encountered challenges during receiving services after the hearings. According to the complainers' survey, 43 per cent of complainers faced difficulties when they again received services from those institutions.

The notable types of challenges include not being enthusiastic and active enough for solving the problem (70%), non-cooperation of concerned authorities (60%), bad behaviour compared to their earlier encounters (42%), create obstacles in deliveries of services (15.9%), demand of unauthorized payment (12%) etc.

The case study reveals that sometimes complainers had to face untoward situations e.g., receiving life threats from local counterparts and influential people after public hearing events. There is also evidence of physical assault experienced by a complainer.

In one case, the life of a complainer became endangered at a public hearing event before the arrival of ACC personnel and local administration. Thus, the security of complainers has become a matter of concern for organizers.

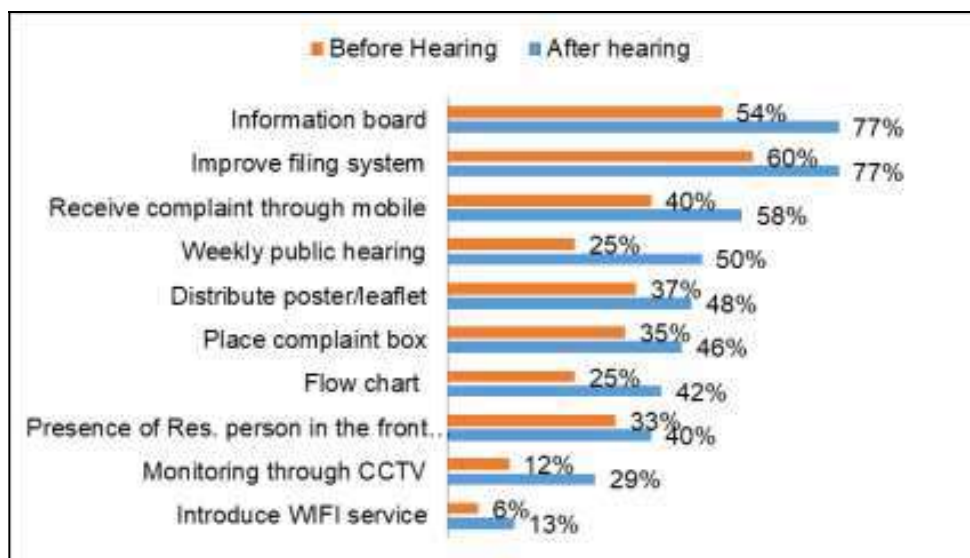
#### ***Individuals involved in harassing complainers***

Complainers who voiced complaints during the public hearing events experienced negative responses from concerned authorities. Among the complainers 75 per cent experienced from officials/staffs of concerned authorities. This is followed by complainers against whom (40%) complaints were made. A complainer whose land had been occupied by an influential quarter was forced to leave his place after facing a threat for making the complaint on the occupation. The complainer did not receive the necessary security and support from the local administration too.

### **Post-public hearing institutional responses**

#### ***Measures were taken by concerned institutions***

The surveys conducted with complainers and authorities reveal that after public hearing institutions took certain measures for improving the quality of services. Almost all the measures pertained to improving transparency and accountability of public services. They exhibited positive trends regarding some indicators that include improved filing system, receiving of the complaint through mobile, conduction of weekly public hearing, distribution of posters/leaflets, placing of complaint box, flowchart, ensure the presence of a responsible person in the front desk, monitoring through CCTV and introduction of WiFi services. For example, 77 per cent of the institutions had information boards after public hearings whereas the corresponding figure before hearing events was 54 per cent. Similar trends were observed in other areas.

**Fig. 3:** Measures taken by authorities after the public hearing

Source: Author

### Participants' opinion on the arrangement of public hearing events

#### *Publicity on hearing programme*

The organizers of 13 public hearings used multiple mediums of publicity to invite local people to attend and come up with complaints. The highest percentage of complainers were informed about public hearing events from friends/neighbours/acquaintances (29%) and use of loudspeakers/miking (29%) followed by information dissemination through leaflets and posters (23%) and ACC officials or members of Duprok representatives (22%), etc.

#### *Time allocation for raising complaints*

Getting the opportunity to raise or read out complaints can be considered as one of the key determinants of a successful public hearing. Although the majority of the participants (96%) got the opportunity to raise complaints, 4% of complainers could not raise their complaints. The findings of the complainers' survey demonstrate that the majority of the complainers (97%) got sufficient time to raise and read out their complaints during the public hearing events. Complainers who could not get enough time to do the same due to shortage of time and presence of the influential persons and concerned authority. In those cases, organizers sometimes forced complainers to read out their complaints hurriedly. However, in a few public hearings, a considerable time was spent for giving guests to deliver their long speeches.

The seating arrangements of public hearings were found highly satisfactory. According to the survey, 95.8 per cent of the participants viewed that the seating arrangements in the public hearing venue were comfortable and satisfactory. A little percentage (i.e., 4.2%) expressed their dissatisfaction. Almost all the participants (97.4%) expressed their

satisfaction with the quality of the sound system arranged for public hearing events. All 13 public hearings were arranged at district and *Upazila* headquarters, and central offices of the concerned institutions (e.g., RAJUK). Therefore, the location of the arrangements was found convenient by the complainers. The survey shows that almost all complainers (97.4%) were satisfied with the location of the venues as they were easy to locate and commute. Almost all participants (94.2%) opined that public hearing events commenced in due time.

No complainer was found to dislike public hearing events. The reason for the liking was it created opportunities for making authorities accountable before the public (75%) followed by the opportunity to raise complaints before officials (69%) and commitment to solving complaints (20%) etc.

### **Challenges of Public Hearing**

Public hearing is a multi-stakeholder event involving different stages. It needs to mobilize ordinary people and institutions and other stakeholders at different stages of public hearing such as collecting complaints, organizing the event, raising complaints at the event and facilitating their solutions. Moreover, complaints on deteriorating public services sometimes create anomalous situations with the prevailing state of affairs, especially with various rules, regulations and practices. Sometimes, the interests of different stakeholders are intertwined. Therefore, a public hearing event needs coordination, mobilization and persuasion of different stakeholders which sometimes poses different challenges.

### **Challenges during organizing the events**

One of the main challenges of organizing public hearings is the Lack of citizens' awareness on the public hearing processes. Ordinary complainers do not know exactly what the public hearing is, why the public hearing is arranged and what benefit it would bring. Therefore, some people were not forthcoming and enthusiastic enough to raise complaints at the public hearing. Moreover, people don't have enough knowledge about the services provided by government institutions. Sometimes service recipients do not know how to get a service, who is responsible for the service, the jurisdiction of the concerned office etc. Therefore, service recipients raised complaints against one office that should be against another office. Such types of complaints created confusion at public hearing events and institutions fall into dilemmas to solve them.

Generally, public hearings are arranged at Upazila and district headquarters, therefore publicity of public hearing (Lack of sufficient publicity) events are mostly confined within the periphery of Upazila and district headquarters. Thus, people from remote and disadvantaged areas got less opportunity to learn about public hearing events and thereby lessening their participation. Additionally, public hearings were shown less participation of people from the marginalized areas. The location of the hearing events is also found to pose constraints to people living in remote areas. Thus, people from disadvantaged regions got less opportunities to participate in public hearing events.

Furthermore, service recipients feel hesitate to submit complaints. As compliant boxes were installed at DC offices, UNO offices or the head office of concerned institutions, ordinary people hesitated to submit complaints fearing repercussions from public officials and influential. Besides, in some cases, concerned authorities, brokers or influential political persons prevented or intimidated a few complainers to raise complaints. Eventually, few complainers kept themselves away from raising their complaints.

On the other hand, the lack of interest of public officials was found to participate in the public hearing. Some responsible officials of some institutions or offices were found to be reluctant to participate in some public hearing events due to other businesses. As a result, some complaints could not be responded during the public hearing events in a proper manner and administrative measures to resolve them lingered. Moreover, not all public institutions are invited to public hearing events. It is observed that some local offices/institutions that are found to be corrupt and delinquent i.e. police, tax, custom, Roads and Highway, Water Development Board were not invited at the public hearing events. There is a lack of logistics, human resources and enough budget allocation for the ACC to arrange public hearings.

### **Challenges during the public hearing**

Sometimes public hearings started late in some places because of late attendance of guests and giving them protocol. Moreover, in some places, considerable time was lost because of lengthy speeches given by some guests and to accommodate all guests to deliver their speech. It is observed that sometimes public hearing sessions were often interfered with and interrupted by a section of local influential political and elected preventatives. There was an instance of postponing a public hearing event because of a scuffle between the supporters of a political party and complainers.

### **Challenges after the public hearing**

Sometimes the resolution of complaints went into oblivion due to transfers and retirements of a concerned public official. The ACC and participating institutions undertook weakly or less follow up to ensure resolution of complaints raised at public hearing sessions even with a specific deadline. It is observed that almost two-thirds of the complaints (73%) raised at public hearing events have not received solutions from concerned institutions. At public hearing events, authorities gave commitments to solve problems. However, some of them exhibited negligence or lack of interest in solving those complaints.

Sometimes, solutions to raised complaints rested with the jurisdiction of the court therefore the solutions were beyond the jurisdiction of authorities. It is highly visible in cases of land disputes. However, complainers attended the hearing programme with the hope of getting the solution to their complaints. There is a lack of interest of newly deputed officials to execute decisions were made by the public hearing. This study reveals that the rotation of public officials causes an obstacle to resolving the complaints. The public officials who join after the public hearing events often do not feel comfortable

or show interest to execute the decision or commitment given by their respective authorities. In some cases, they are found fully uninformed.

Some people who attended and raised complaints at public hearings felt repercussions from institutions and other powerful quarters. Sometimes, they felt insecure about their life and post-hearing harassment. The types of uncertainty people felt included intimidation by concerned authorities, risks of being harassed and pressure from political leaders and locally influential people.

### **Concluding remarks**

Public hearing has found as a powerful tool for creating social accountability through mutual interaction of service providers and service recipients. Thus, it can be considered as an effective intervention for fighting corruption and improving public services that eventually enhance public trust in service delivery institutions. It is found that public hearing events in 13 areas were organized in a good manner though there are some challenges. They have created considerable enthusiasm among the recipients of the services. Despite some positive outcomes, this initiative has suffered from certain procedural and institutional deficiencies. The challenges might not be surmountable to overcome. The research would embolden policymakers and public managers to bring changes in the attitude and building professionalism of public officials that would make a significant difference in curbing corruption and reducing service recipients' miseries.

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