

TV Talkshow

Effective
Parliament



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Foreword

The publication "TV Talkshow: Effective Parliament" contains summary of observations made by lawmakers, civil society members and media professionals in a TV program "Sangsad Katha". The three-episode TV talk show is an activity of MRDI's Engaging Media in Governance and Legislation project under the PRODIP program, supported by The Asia Foundation Bangladesh, funded by the USAID and UKAid. The project aims to enhance public participation in political governance and legislation by establishing close linkage between parliament and the civil society through engaging media in the process.

The publication is not a direct transcription of the TV program. It is a summarized presentation of the views and comments of the participants. It also contains an electronic copy of all episodes of the program in DVD format. Viewers those who have missed out the TV program, will be able to watch it from the DVD.

The program has been produced and aired over private TV channel Desh TV with the aim to make the viewers aware about the legislation process of the country, functions of parliamentary

standing committees, role of government and opposition MPs and role of the parliament as a whole in fulfilling aspirations of people. MPs themselves will be more aware about their role and people's expectation from them.

Three episodes of the show covered role of MPs in legislation, role of MPs in oversight functions and role of media and civil society to make JS strengthened.

In addition to the discussions by panelists in the indoor set, interviews and discussions were also recorded at outdoor locations. Elected representatives, local government representatives, vulnerable women and people of different segments took part in the interviews. Thus voice of the local people has been heard at the national level through the media.

We would like to take this opportunity to appreciate the cooperation we received from The Asia Foundation-PRODIP in producing the program.

We are also thankful to Desh TV for their support in producing and airing the program.

We would consider this publication worthwhile if the target audience find it useful.



Episode 1

Role of MPs in Legislation

PARTICIPANTS



Barrister Anisul Islam Mahmud, MP



Saber Hossain Chowdhury, MP

INTERVIEWEES



Sheikh Razzak Ali
Former Speaker



Rasheda Begum Hira, MP



Md. Fazle Rabbi Miah, MP



Pankaz Chakrabarty
DPPF Convener
Chittagong



Advocate Firoz Ahmed
DPPF convener
Khulna

The views of the discussants have been placed under the following issue heads:

Lawmakers or Development Agents

Constitution empowers the parliament to pass laws for the country. As elected peoples' representatives, the Members of Parliament are basically expected to serve the nation by playing roles in law making. But in many instances MPs engaged themselves more as kind of 'development agents' as they become more interested in looking after the development agenda of their respective constituencies.

Empowering the Local Government

The issue of strengthening the local government system is pivotal if we like to see the lawmakers performing their legislative duties better. Only a functional local government system can pave way for local-level peoples' representatives to look after local development agenda and thereby, allowing MPs to dedicate more their time on law making.





Legal Bindings

This is a critical question that in our form constitutional democracy, whether the lawmakers are there only to say 'YES' to all the proposed legislations tabled in the parliament. Are they 'rubber-stamp'? There are certain provisions like Article 70 that come their way as barrier to exercise free minds. If one goes against party-line, Article 70 is there to accuse him of 'floor-crossing'. Similarly many lawmakers find it a difficulty that if one is expelled from one party halfway through the tenure of a parliament, s/he cannot vie for next poll with another party's ticket due to legal compulsion of three-year sustained membership of a party for achieving the eligibility.

Lack of Logistics

Lack of logistics sometimes makes lawmakers handicapped and they cannot provide enough inputs that they desire to for making good laws. Like developed democracies, MPs don't get sufficient number of support staffs and secretariat supports to do research on various issues on which they (MPs) don't necessarily have sufficient knowledge beforehand.

Citizen's Engagement in Legislative Process

Involvement of citizens, the voters, the people of the constituencies, the civil society representatives, experts in the lawmaking process is very crucial. Parliamentary standing committees are the bodies where proposed legislations are discussed prior being finally passed in the full House. Other than the lawmakers themselves if issue-experts, general beneficiaries (voters in general, their community leaders) are invited at parliamentary committee-level, they can add values. More public consultations can add value in enriching new laws or amending old laws.

Executive Exercise vs. Legislative Exercise

No denial to the fact that executive branch of the government plays a great part of lawmaking, in terms of preparing and drafting the basic structure of any new piece of proposed law. Here ministry concerned, cabinet - in all stages bureaucrats and legal experts are also involved. But at the end the lawmakers must get sufficient time at different stages of law-drafting for giving the best of their intellectual inputs.





The Best Practices

In our tradition (particularly since 1991) opposition parties arbitrarily skip parliament sessions thereby depriving the people from being benefited from their intellects in law-making process. On the contrary, the way parliaments were run, in many instances that opposition lawmakers and MPs in their private capacities also failed to give best inputs because of weak, partisan practices in the House. So a vibrant parliamentary practice can create enabling environment for MPs to play better lawmaking rules.

Reform

Reform is a good way to move forward. Many lawmakers consider proportional representation (parliamentary seats in accordance to votes a party muster) can bring about positive change in quality and practices of lawmakers. In current system whoever gets highest votes - in constituency-wise - becomes the MP. But in many democracies, the number of seats is allocated among parties calculating the percentage of votes they (parties) get in all constituencies altogether. The regular standing committees apart, parliament can form select committees following British parliamentary model - that's another reform area.



Episode 2

Role of Media and Civil Society in Strengthening Jatiya Sangsad

PARTICIPANTS



Rashed Khan Menon, MP



Professor Dilara Chowdhury
State Policy Analyst

INTERVIEWEES



Ruby Rahman, MP



Md. Shahriar Alam, MP



Manjurul Ahsan Bulbul
Media personnel

The views of the discussants have been placed under the following issue heads:

Culture of House Boycott

Media and civil society can play a role in making the parliament more effective. The parliament boycott culture as demonstrated by major political parties, whoever sits in the opposition, by turns, in fact put a sustained dent on effectiveness of parliamentary democracy over the last two decades. Through raising collective voice against such a culture both media and civil society can always make a difference. In absence of a vibrant opposition parliament becomes largely dysfunctional with little scope of raising issues of public concerns in the floor of the House.





Substantive Role Played by Media

Media sometimes project saucy, less-important more than the substantive businesses of the parliament. Media reports can be more in-depth and more focused on substantive deliberations that take place in the parliament.

Effective Committee System

Committees appear to be more effective than the parliament itself, at least, in terms of lawmakers' participations. Though opposition mostly boycott the sessions of the parliament, in many cases they participate in parliamentary standing committee meetings thus making these watchdog bodies more functional. It's also a good development that committees are led by non-ministers and some are even chaired by opposition lawmakers.

Linking Civil Society with JS Committees

Establishing better linkage between the parliamentary committees and civil society can be very effective in strengthening the parliament. The standing committee can elicit public opinion on crucial issues by inviting members of the civil society. Through this practice the committees can get some insights on what people are thinking on different national issues.

Giving Media a Wider Access

Currently sessions of the parliament are open to press. Media people can cover the House deliberations from press gallery. But the meetings of the parliamentary standing committees are held in camera. Many civil society members, journalists and even a section of lawmakers also consider that giving media the full access to standing committee meetings will help advance the parliamentary good practices. This will enhance transparency and accountability too.





Episode 3

Role of MPs in oversight functions

PARTICIPANTS



Mohammad Fazlul Azim, MP



Waresat Hussain Belal, MP

INTERVIEWEES



Sanjida Khanam, MP



S M Akram, Former MP



Professor Dr. Harun ar Rashid
State Policy Analyst

The views of the discussants have been placed under the following issue heads:

Making Government Accountable

Participating in regular sessions of the parliament and lawmaking exercises, the MPs have a very important task of taking part in meetings of the parliamentary standing committees. These bodies basically work as watchdogs and monitor how ministries are run. Non-minister MPs head such committees giving the lawmakers a good forum to play role and make government more accountable.





Expenditure Monitoring

By participating in budget preparation exercises, budget discussions and also in committee meetings those deal with government financial involvements, the lawmakers can keep track on public expenditures. Thus they can play a role in stopping public fund misuse and ensure better financial management in public sector.

Making Best Use of Parliamentary Practices

There are ample scopes for lawmakers to make their voices heard on the floor of the parliament. There are question-answer sessions, point-of-order, call attention notices etc. - these all are good parliamentary practices by exercising which an individual MP, no matter s/he belongs to treasury or opposition, can bring into fore issues of public concern. But in weaker democracies sometimes these are not well practiced. Sometimes ministers duck sessions and questions and supplementary queries made by lawmakers remained either unanswered or ill-answered. Sometimes public concerns raised in the parliament are not followed through properly.





Reform in Lawmaking Exercises

In lawmaking process traditionally the lawmakers get scopes to give their inputs once proposed laws are placed before the parliament and sent to parliamentary committee for scrutiny. Prior that a new piece law is conceived, prepared and drafted at the levels of line ministry and law ministry. The MPs have got no or little access at those primary stages of lawmaking.

Lively and Constructive Participation

Lively and constructive participation of all the lawmakers can make a parliament more vibrant and effective. Lawmakers need to attend the sessions regularly, participate in budget discussion, in discussion on president's speech etc. They also need to come out of the practice of just 'glorifying' and 'eulogizing' respective leaders and parties. Instead they need to speak for the people, speak to promote the causes of the people.



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Effective Parliament

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