

Local Government Issues

NUPF Executive Committee Elected

On July 20th the National Union Parishad Forum (NUPF) elected its 33-member Executive Committee, made up of 21 UP Chairs, 6 General Members and 6 Female Members elected to Reserved Seats. This election came at the end of a ten month effort to organize all of the UPs in a single national association, based on District NUPF Committees in 63 Districts. More than 10,000 UP Chairs and Members have participated directly in the formation of the District Committees.

The election of the 33 members of the Executive Committee was done by these 63 NUPF District Committees, and organized along Divisional lines. The Divisional breakdown on the NUPF Executive Committee is: Khulna-5, Sylhet-4, Barisal-4, Rajshahi-7, Chittagong-5, and Dhaka-8.

As well as ensuring adequate representation of both UP Chairs and Members, and of representatives from all areas of the country, in electing the District Committees and the Executive Committee, the NUPF also tried to maintain a fair political balance, by nominating leaders affiliated to all major political parties. This is in line with the NUPF's constitution, which states that it will be a non-partisan organization.



NUPF Executive Committee Oath Taking, July 21 Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Center

The 33 members of the newly elected NUPF Executive Committee are as follows:

Golam Sarwar	President
Ataharul Islam Bulbul	Vice President
Md. Mahbubur Rahman Tulu	Vice President
Golam Mortuza	Vice President
Md. Rezaul Karim Nesar	Vice President
Md. Bellal Hossain	Vice President
Moazzem Hossain (Matuk)	Vice President
Rehana Akhter (Member)	Vice President
Mustaqur Rahman Mafur	Secretary General
M.A. Majid	Joint Secretary General
Md. Ezadur Rahman (Milon)	Joint Secretary General
Md. Tozammel Hoque	Joint Secretary General
Ruhul Amin Fakir	Joint Secretary General
Fakir Tarikul Islam	Secretary
A.K.M. Azad (Mukta)	Assistant Secretary
Syed Shakhawat Hossain Selim	Secretary
Binoy Krishna Haldar	Assistant Secretary
Aklima Khanom Chameli	Assistant Secretary
Yamun Nahar	Secretary
S. M. Saiful Islam	Secretary
Shamsul Alam Khan	Secretary
Nasir Uddin Ahmed	Secretary
Golam Jilani	Secretary
M.A. Hamid	Secretary
Md. Abul Kashem	Secretary
Thoi Ching Marma	Secretary
Sreemati Neelima Rani Kundu	Member
Shaila Sharmin	Member
A.S.M. Monowaruzzaman	Member
Nehar Begum	Member
Nur Hossain	Member
Salaudin Nayan	Member
Zakir Hossain Khan	Member

According to the NUPF's constitution, the term of the Executive Committee members is two years. At the same time, there is no provision to allow for reelection to the Executive Committee positions.

NUPF Dhaka Office

Recently the NUPF inaugurated its national office in Dhaka, with the participation of the Charge de Affairs of the US Embassy, Mr. Gene George, along with most of the Presidents of the NUPF District Committees, and representatives from NGOs, academia, and media.



US Charge de Affairs Gene George inaugurating NUPF Dhaka office

Support for NUPF

The NUPF is supported by USAID Bangladesh, through the Local Government Initiative (LGI). LGI will be carrying out training of more than 1,200 NUPF leaders, both Chairs and Members, to build the organizational capacity of the NUPF, and to improve the governance of UPs in areas such as democratic leadership, women's roles, transparency in UP finances, relations with Upazila administration and oversight of service delivery in health, education and agriculture.

LGI also assists the NUPF in regular opinion surveys of UP leaders, to learn their views on critical policy issues. Recently LGI and NUPF carried out a survey to evaluate current national government policies in key areas of UP finance and devolution of roles and responsibilities.

Union Parishad Leaders Send a Message to Dhaka

Who is responsible for the problems of the UPs? What has to be done now to make them more effective? How do UPs manage their resources? Are they transparent? What happens to the money that the Upazilas collect for the UPs? What can UPs do to improve the poor quality of the services provided by the national government?

These were some of the questions raised at the meeting of 220 UP Chairs and Members organized by the Local Government Initiative (LGI) and the National Union Parishad Forum (NUPF) in the Bangladesh-China Conference Center on July 21. The meeting focused on finding practical solutions to some of the difficult problems faced by the UPs in their everyday activities.

From Problems to Solutions

The main problems discussed in the meeting had to do with transparency in UP finances; UP control over development projects funded through the ADP allocation; the lack of accountability of the Upazilas in managing the resources that they collect for the UPs; and the bad quality of service delivery by the national government in areas such as health, education and agriculture.

But what about the solutions? Instead of trying to get national decision makers to agree on reforms, the strategies discussed in the LGI-NUPF meeting focused on how to mobilize the almost 60,000 UP leaders around the country to use the existing institutional and legal framework.

Financial Management

The solutions put forward by the participants were simple. With respect to transparency, one proposal was to have the UP councils establish permanent standing committees on finances, and to use common guidelines for preparation and open debate of UP revenue and spending budgets.

Most of the participants agreed that the ADP allocation ought to go directly to the UPs, and not through the Upazilas. However, in the absence of a commitment from the national government to adopt such a policy, they agreed that something has to be done to reduce the unwarranted interference of Upazila officials and MPs in the process of allocation of the ADP funds.

The participating UP Chairs and Members also agreed that the UPs form inter-Union committees-- which are allowed under the UP Ordinance to prepare a single, common plan for allocation of the ADP funds in the hands of the Upazila.

Transparency and Accountability

One of the issues raised by local government leaders across the country has been the lack of transparency and accountability of the Upazila administration.



NUPF Chairs, General Members and Female Members in the July 21 Meeting in the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Center

With respect to transparency, one problem is that Upazilas do not inform UPs about the revenues that they collect from land transfer taxes and market leasing. Nor do UPs have a say in the use of these revenues. The solution? It's simple. The elected local government officials should monitor the unelected Upazila officials in their management of the revenues earmarked for the UPs.

Finally, the UPs also looked at the problem of the lack of accountability of the Upazila in service delivery in the UPs, especially in health, education and agriculture. The solution, again, is quite simple: activate the standing committees of the UPs to oversee the work of the public servants who provide services in the UPs.

A Message to Dhaka

The comments from the UP leaders attending the LGI-NUPF meeting were enthusiastic:

"We never get the chance to talk about solutions, because we are always going on about all of our problems".

"We have always thought that the national government was going to give us the solutions. But we will have to do it ourselves".

"Strengthening UPs is not just about giving more power to the Chairs; the Members have to be involved, otherwise it won't work".

The conclusion of the meeting was clear. The decision makers in Dhaka see the Union Parishad as a problem. But the elected local governments want to send Dhaka a message: they can offer solutions.

Are National Policy Makers Willing to Listen to UPs?

One of the widespread complaints of the Union Parishads leaders in the LGI-NUPF meeting on July 21 in the Bangladesh-China Conference Center was that decision makers in Dhaka are not willing to listen to them. This criticism applies equally to the LGRD&C Ministry and to other national policy making bodies, including the Parliament.

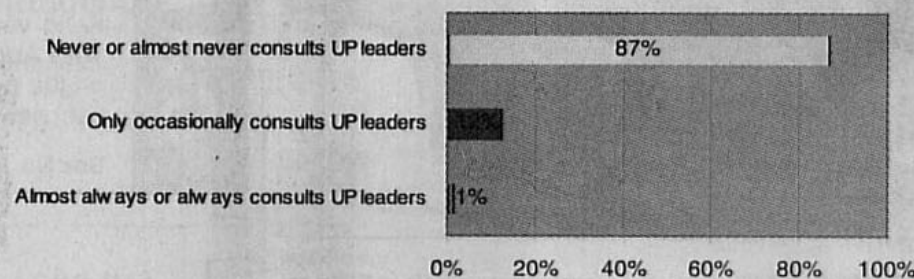
During the meeting, LGI presented the results of an opinion survey of UP Chairs, aimed at capturing their views on current government policies. The survey, which was carried out in mid-July, analyses the opinions of a representative sample of 225 UP Chairs from all Divisions across the country.

Consultation?

One of the most striking results of the survey was the highly critical views of the Chairs on the unwillingness of the LGRD&C Ministry to consult policy decisions with UPs. A total of 87% of the survey respondents said that the Ministry "never or almost never consults with UPs".

One expression of this lack of dialogue between the LGRD&C Ministry and elected local officials is the constant production of circulars and orders regulating UP activities, with no previous consultation or discussion.

Does the LGRD&C Ministry Consult with UPs?



Source: Opinion survey of a representative sample of 225 UP Chairs, carried out by LGI-NUPF in July, 2004. Margin of error < 0.05

Just a few months ago, one circular obliged the UP Chairs and Members to request authorization of DCs or UNOs to attend training activities. Eventually, in the face of strong, vocal protest from the NUPF, this was withdrawn. However, the fundamental problem, the Ministry's lack of commitment to holding consultations and dialogue with UPs, remains unchanged.

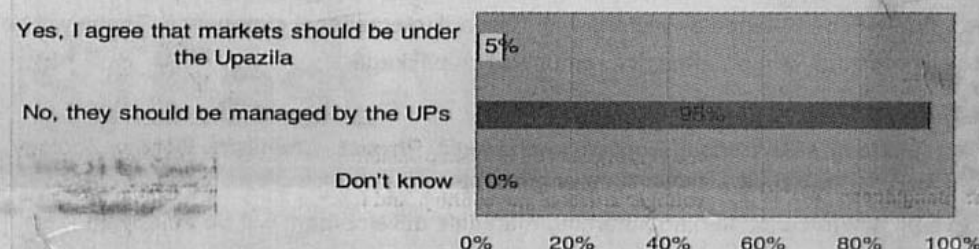
Even in the recent decision to establish a monitoring cell on corruption in UPs, the Ministry did not invite UPs to assist in its design. One NUPF member commented on this decision: "We have no idea how this monitoring cell will work, what its powers are, nothing at all. We heard about it from the television news".

Market Leasing

A good example was the Ministry's circular, issued in 2002, that placed the local markets under the direct control of the Upazila, leaving just one market for the UP.

This decision was unpopular among UPs, to say the least. How unpopular? The opinion survey carried out just recently by LGI for the NUPF shows that 95% of UP Chairs are opposed to this policy.

Do You Agree that Upazilas Should Control Rural Markets?



Source: Opinion survey of a representative sample of 225 UP Chairs, carried out by LGI-NUPF in July, 2004. Margin of error < 0.05

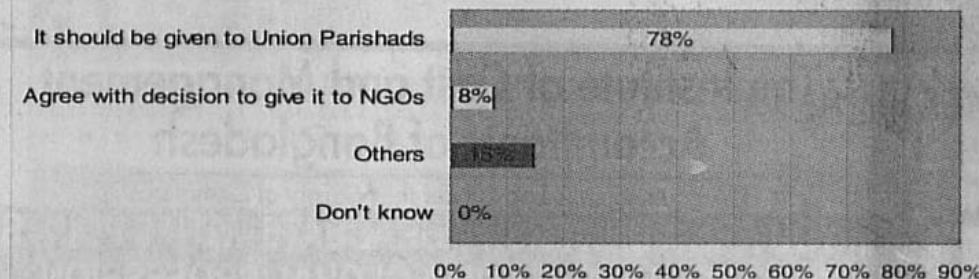
Health

But the problem is not just the LGRD&C Ministry. Other national government ministries often fail to take into consideration elected local governments in important policy decisions that affect delivery of services at the local level.

One good example is health care reform. After the much publicized failure of the attempts at restructuring local health services, the Ministry of Health recently announced that the administration of the Community Health Centers would be contracted to NGOs.

This important policy decision was never even discussed with the local government representatives. Once again, it is highly unpopular with UP Chairs. Only 8% of the respondents to the LGI-NUPF survey agreed with this decision.

Do You Agree that NGOs Should Manage the Community Clinics?



Source: Opinion survey of a representative sample of 225 UP Chairs, carried out by LGI-NUPF in July, 2004. Margin of error < 0.05

What about the MPs?

Again, the problem is not limited just to Ministry officials. Some of the NUPF leaders observed that during the debates on the proposed 14th Constitutional Amendment they tried on several occasions to convene the Members of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Local Government Affairs to a dialogue. However, the MPs were unwilling to meet formally with the NUPF.

As one NUPF leader put it, "MPs in general are not interested in local government strengthening". This despite the fact that as the BNP MP and Rajshahi Mayor Minu noted in a recent meeting with the NUPF, there are as many as 30 sitting MPs who began their political careers as elected UP officials.

The UP leaders noted that the MPs, rather than dedicating their efforts to legislating, now compete with UPs for control over local level planning and budgeting. One question asked of the NUPF members in the meeting was whether the circular that allows MPs to sit as advisors to the Upazila officials should be withdrawn. There was unanimous agreement on the part of the 220 participants. This doesn't mean that all of the MPs are against policies for strengthening local government. However, in the LGI-NUPF meeting the UP leaders said that MPs will not be easily persuaded to let go of their growing power over local affairs.

NUPF Offers Cooperation to improve flood Relief

As the flood situation worsened last week, the National Union Parishad Forum (NUPF) on July 27th sent letters to the Ministry of LGRD&C, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, and all 64 District Commissioners, offering assistance in ensuring the efficiency and transparency of government relief activities.

The national government usually distributes relief materials through the Union Disaster Management Committee in the respective areas; however, there are many problems in the allocation of materials to the UPs. Some are administrative, other are political.

Politics and Relief

The NUPF Secretary, Mr. Mostaqur Rahman Mafur, the chairman of Balagonj Union Parishad of Balagonj Upazila under Sylhet district,

one of the most affected areas said his UP received a scanty amount of relief materials, compared to UPs in less affected areas. This was due primarily to political factors-UP chairs supporting the governing parties receive larger allocations.

This criticism was seconded by another NUPF Executive Committee member, Mr. Syed Sakhawat Hossain Selim, the chairman of Bahadurpur Union Parishad of Madaripur sadar Upazila. Mr. Selim observed that the UPs in his region received less relief materials as they are in the constituency of an opposition MP.

Finally, another NUPF Executive Committee member, Mr. Mahbubur Rahman Tulu, the chairman of Shahapara Union Parishad of Gaibandha sadar Upazila said that in the distribution of relief

materials, the use of criteria other than people's need is politically motivated-and illegal.

Cooperation from NUPF

Concerned with some of the difficulties in the relief effort, in its letter to the government, the NUPF offered to use its association at the District and Upazila levels to improve the overall relief activities.

The NUPF Executive Committee members note that since the flood has worsened, they have received many calls for help from their members, requesting NUPF to intervene to ensure adequate allocation of the relief materials to the Union Disaster Management Committees, whether rice, clothing, housing materials, or medical supplies and rehydration packets for diarrhea.