Act Locally Think Globally



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It is said that strengthening local government and decentralisation are important for good governance and democracy. Can you help us understand why?

First, local government bodies, it is now firmly established, can serve as the medium of citizen participation for increasing the efficacy of developmental activities. Secondly, local government can coach and tutor local communities in the practice of democracy and citizens' rights-based administration and public service delivery. Thirdly, citizens can hold their government accountable and responsible for developmental actions and interventions through their representation in the respective local government. Effective local government can serve as an antidote against two critical disempowering processes: (i) the growing tendency of grossly inequitable distribution of wealth and resources in our society; and (ii) the rigidity, unresponsiveness and poor performance of the centralised planning and management paradigm to bring about desired social changes.

How can local government be more effective so that they can take decisions on matters that affect their lives without always depending on the central government for finances, human resources etc.?

We now have considerable practical and research-based evidence to identify and understand the major obstacles to empowerment of local government institutions especially in terms of enabling local citizens to take decisions that affect their lives. These include the unrepresentative character of the decentralised local institutions, strict bureaucratic and political control (and manipulation) by central government, inadequate mobilisation of local resources, lack of commitment of the political leadership, dominance of rural elites in local decision making, inefficient administrative coordination among nation building public agencies, administrative corruption and connivance, and the chronic dependence of local institutions on central government. Local government and decentralization policies in Bangladesh have served, more than anything else, to create a sub-national political support base for the successive ruling regimes. The local government initiatives have often suffered from a lack of genuine political commitment to devolve power to the local citizens. Notwithstanding the widespread experimentation with varied local government and decentralisation schemes and models, the crucial issues and problems, which regulate the success of local institutions, have not been adequately addressed.

What can be done to overcome these problems?

Such vital issues as local resource mobilisation, greater autonomy of the local state, proper representation of local populace in decentralised institutions, and combating the tendency of central manipulation and interference are yet to be responded to. These (long unresolved) problems and issues have rendered the decentralisation efforts mostly ineffective in bringing about any meaningful, broad-based qualitative changes in the lives of the rural mass.

There is no magic bullet to solve these problems overnight. A strong degree of political commitment, among other things, can certainly facilitate the process of making local government policies effective in the field. Alongside, research and investigation into the performance and future potential of local government policies and practices must continue to guide and illuminate the policy makers. ■