

Does Public Engagement Matter? Parliament, Public Engagement and the Budget Process in Bangladesh*

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Abstract This paper explores the role of public engagement in the budgetary process in Bangladesh. It particularly focuses on the role of the Parliamentary Caucus on National Planning and Budget (PCNPB) and its relations with different Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) which provide different kinds of support to MPs. Evidence shows that the strategic partnership that the PCNPB has established with different outside organisations have turned out to be beneficial in various ways. There is now better scope for ‘informed’ scrutiny of the budget than before, although it is difficult to measure its effects. The paper delineates problems that may discourage the institutionalisation of the PCNPB. It also identifies factors that may help it overcome the problems.

INTRODUCTION

Formally, the ‘power of the purse’ in Bangladesh, as in other democracies, is vested in the Parliament. Article 83 of the Constitution provides that no tax shall be levied or

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collected except by or under an authority of an Act of Parliament. Nor can any expenditure be incurred except with the authorisation of the Parliament. The case for legislative participation in budgeting rests on a number of grounds. Wehner argues that not only does the constitution require that the budget be authorised by the parliament; the involvement of the Parliament in the budget-making process provides some kind of checks and balances between the executive and the legislature, enhances transparency, enables effective scrutiny, ensures participation and encourages consensus among the conflicting actors.² Greater parliamentary input into the budgetary process leads to greater government accountability and transparency, sustainable national consensus regarding macro-economic policies and greater possibilities for community-level input. Many parliaments, especially those patterned on the Westminster model, however, find it difficult to contribute much to the policy/budget process mostly for structural reasons. One way to overcome the deficiency, as experience shows, is to encourage public engagement in the budgetary process.

Public engagement requires seeking input from the public to make 'informed' decisions on matters awaiting a parliament's attention/decision as well as sharing of parliamentary outputs/information with the public.³ Reasons for engaging the public with parliament are intended, among other things, to allow access to the institution, to increase public understanding of parliament and its work, to broaden the range of voices heard by parliament, and potentially to enhance legitimacy.⁴ It is especially important for democratic renewal.⁵ Greater engagement of the public with parliament and its activities is also likely to raise the public image of parliament and parliamentarians and improve public trust in politics.⁶

² Wehner, J. (2004) *Back from the Sideline: Redefining the Contribution of Legislatures to the Budget Cycle*. Washington: The World Bank Institute, 2004, pp. 2-4.

³ The Hansard Society, *Parliaments and Public Engagement*. London: The Hansard Society, 2011.

⁴ R. Kelly and C. Bochel, *Parliament's Engagement with the Public*. Briefing paper 8279. London: House of Commons, 2018.

⁵ C. Hendriks and A. Kay, 'From "Opening Up" to Democratic Renewal: Deepening Public Engagement in Legislative Committees'. *Government and Opposition*, 54(1), 2019, pp. 25-51.

⁶ R. Hardin, 'Government without Trust', *Journal of Trust Research*, 3, 2013, pp. 32-52; C. Leston-Bandeira, 'The Pursuit of Legitimacy as a Key Driver for Public Engagement: The European Parliament Case'. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 67, 2014, pp. 415-436.

There is, however, no one best way of encouraging public engagement. Differences can be noticed in the ways such engagement takes place.⁷ The main fora of parliamentary engagement with the public include making petitions, visiting parliament, making evidence to select committees, attending public bills committee meetings, joining workshop and presentation, watching proceedings, and reporting on parliamentary activity.⁸ The effect of these different methods will vary considerably.⁹ Referring to petitions, Hendriks and Kay observe that these tend to replicate many of the existing socio-demographic biases in political participation, and thus they tend to attract public input from those already politically active. There is the need for improving the breadth and depth of engagement and participation:

To deepen participation means moving beyond one-way information flows, towards more deliberative conditions where communication is open, reflective and dialogical ... To broaden participation requires reaching out to everyday publics and actively recruiting under-represented or marginalised voices.¹⁰

Public engagement may be direct and/or mediated through Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). CSOs are non-state actors whose aims are neither to generate profits nor to seek governing power; they unite people to advance shared goals and interests. CSOs include nongovernment organisations (NGOs),¹¹ professional associations, foundations, independent research institutes, community-based organisations (CBOs), faith-based organisations, people's organisations, social movements, and labour unions.¹² CSOs can help MPs undertake important functions in an effective manner. These can also help them improve communication with the electorate. In return, CSOs can legitimise their involvement with different policies by collaborating with

⁷ C. Leston-Bandeira (ed.), *Parliament and Citizen*. London: Routledge, 2013.

⁸ Kelly and Bochel, *Parliament's Engagement with the Public*; C. Leston-Bandeira, 'How Deeply are Parliaments Engaging on Social Media'. *Information Polity*, 18(4), 2013, pp. 281-297.

⁹ C. Leston-Bandeira and L. Thompson, 'Integrating the View of the Public into the Formal Legislative Process: Public Reading Stage in the UK House of Commons'. *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 23(4), 2017, pp. 508-528.

¹⁰ Hendriks and Kay, 'From "Opening Up" to Democratic Renewal'.

¹¹ Differences between CSOs and NGOs lie in their orientation, objectives and the strategies they adopt to get things done. Generally, CSOs have a more political and policy orientation than NGOs, which often are development-oriented and concerned with delivery of services. CSOs may also provide services but these are not as prominent as those provided by NGOs.

¹² Asian Development Bank, *Civil Society Organization: Source Book*. Manila: ADB, 2009, p. 1.

parliament including its committees. Parliamentarians and CSOs can both hope to gain from mutual interaction.

Until recently, parliaments in many developing countries did not realise the potential benefits of collaboration with outside actors – CSOs and NGOs – partly due to ignorance and partly because of legal loopholes. However, under the influence of donors, these parliaments are now learning how to use different techniques as a means to engaging the public with the parliamentary and governance processes. The above observations are not intended to argue that much of what CSOs do is politically value-free. They may often engage in activities that are aimed at regime change or destabilisation, and thus may risk causing political tension and controversy. In general, however, involvement of CSOs is seen as beneficial.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

This paper explores the role of public engagement in the budget process in Bangladesh, focusing particularly on the drafting and legislating stages of the budget cycle. It specifically tries to identify the roles and relations of the key actors involved in the budget-making process. Special emphasis will be given to identifying the role of the Parliamentary Caucus on National Planning and Budget (henceforth the PCNPB, or the Caucus) and examining the role of different CSOs in providing support to the Caucus and MPs. The PCNPB is an innovation of the Democratic Budget Movement (DBM), a CSO which has popularised the idea of decentralised budgeting for a long time. DBM provides the main source of support to the Caucus. SUPRO, another CSO, also has close links with the PCNPB, The Parliament Secretariat, which was not hospitable to proposals for public engagement in its activities in the past, has apparently changed its attitude now. It now voluntarily promotes public engagement, especially in budget-related activities. Detractors of public engagement now appreciate its need and value. This paper examines the extent to which public engagement matters in the budgetary process in Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study has been collected from secondary and primary sources. Secondary sources include consultation of books, journals, and newspaper reports. Primary sources include reading of Hansard, interviews with different stakeholders, including in-depth interviews with chairs of parliamentary standing committees, members of the

PCNPB, officials of the Ministry of Finance, representatives of think tanks, and key officials of CSOs providing support to PCNPB. We held meetings with five parliamentary committee chairs including heads of different financial committees (e.g., finance, public undertakings, and estimates), heads of three NGOs/CSOs, representatives of the BEA and heads of two think tanks. In addition, we interviewed members of the PCNPB and representatives of different CSOs that provide specialised support to the Caucus. In total, we interviewed 13 MP/committee chairs, and 15 non-MP experts, mostly before and after the budget session (June-July) in 2017. Interviews were held in the offices of respondents. On average, interviews lasted an hour.

THE MAKING OF THE BUDGET

The Constitution of Bangladesh provides the basic legal framework for government budgeting. It requires that the government prepare an Annual Financial Statement every financial year (which starts on 1 July and ends on 30 June) and get it approved by the Parliament. The making of the budget is essentially a bureaucratic exercise. The Finance Division of the Ministry of Finance has the overall responsibility for the preparation of the budget. The Budget Wing and the Development Wing of the Ministry are respectively charged with preparing the revenue budget and the development budget. The Development Wing, however, has to prepare the estimates of development outlay in close collaboration with the Planning Commission (PC). The PC plays a dominant role in the making of the development budget. The preparation of the budget takes a long time; by the time the budget is introduced, the budget for the following year has almost been in preparation already.

Different actors and agencies both within and outside the government are involved in the budget preparation process. Within the government, three organisations – the Internal Resources Division (IRD)/National Board of revenue (NBR), the External Relations Division (ERD) and the Planning Commission – play a crucial role. The IRD/NBR is mainly concerned with mobilising resources from the internal sources; while the ERD negotiates with bilateral and multilateral donors, seeking foreign aid and assistance mostly to finance development projects included in the Annual Development Program (ADP). The way these agencies behave will largely influence the budgetary process, especially in respect of the financing of the budget.

The budget cycle has two phases: Phase 1, when the budget is determined in aggregate form (size); and Phase 2, when details of ministry allocations are discussed. Phase 1 discussion mostly focuses on fiscal, monetary and external finance issues. A Coordination Council, headed by the Minister for Finance, and consisting of the

Minister for Commerce, Bangladesh Bank Governor, Secretary, Finance Division, Secretary, Internal Resources Division, and Member (Program) of the Planning Commission as members, is charged with exploring these issues. The Council is responsible for:

- coordinating the macro-economic framework including fiscal, monetary and exchange rate strategies and policies;
- ensuring consistency among macro-economic targets of growth, inflation and fiscal, monetary and external accounts; and
- meeting for the purposes of clauses (a) and (b) before the finalisation of the budget to determining the extent of public sector borrowing taking into account credit requirements of the private sector, monetary expansion based on projected growth, price inflation, and net foreign assets of the banking system.¹³

The Bangladesh Bank is responsible for placing before the Coordination Council relevant data relating to monetary expansion and government borrowing from the banking system, and the assessment of the Bangladesh Bank regarding the impact of economic policies of the government on monetary aggregates and balance of payments. The Ministry of Finance brings to the notice of the Co-ordination Council the impact of tax, budget and debt management policies on overall macro-economic situation.

The Budget Monitoring and Resource Committee headed by the Finance Minister is at the helm during Phase 2. All 10 relevant ministries/divisions are represented on the Committee. The Committee coordinates overall resource mobilisation and expenditure program of the government. Intra-governmental consultation on the budget between the Finance Division (FD) and the agencies, where the latter are allowed to discuss their needs with the Ministry, is also held at this phase. Taking into account the actual expenditures of the past six months and other relevant factors, estimates are finalised at the budget meetings. These two phases remain the exclusive prerogative of bureaucrats and professionals. There is no third party involvement or consultation at these phases.

¹³ Bangladesh Parliament, *Rules of Procedure Parliament of the People's Republic of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Parliament Secretariat, 2007.

PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATION AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE BUDGET PROCESS

Until recently, rarely was there any scope for public consultation on the budget. Budgeting was essentially seen as a bureaucratic exercise. However, although the budget is still heavily influenced by the bureaucracy, a new trend – consultation with outside stakeholders – is emerging. The Finance Minister now routinely holds pre-budget consultation meetings with different organisations usually between March and May, although the effect of such consultation is difficult to measure. The consultation meetings held with different groups are as follows: top economic think tanks, NGO leaders, parliamentary committee chairs, economic reporter’s forum, renowned economists, top bureaucrats and representatives of national daily newspapers. Immediately after the consultations, Ministry of Finance officials prepare a summary of the main points discussed in each meeting and submit it to the Finance Minister. After the conclusion of these meetings, the Finance Ministry prepares a statement, classifying the recommendations into different groups with comments on their implementation status, and submits it to the Finance Minister.

It is difficult to identify the extent to which pre-budget consultations are merely ‘public relations exercises’ or whether they provide real inputs to the making of the budget. Those attending these consultation meetings have mixed feelings. Some argue that they have to attend such meetings without much preparation. The fault, however, does not lie only with the stakeholders; the Finance Ministry itself has also to accept the blame to a certain extent. As one parliamentary standing committee chair observed:

I wasn’t even in Dhaka when I got the call to have a pre-budget meeting with the Finance Minister. I was in my constituency. The call was made just a day before the meeting was scheduled to be held. What can you do in such a situation? I did not attend this year’s meeting as I wasn’t prepared for it.

Some other parliamentary committee chairs observed that such consultation meetings do not yield any positive results, even when stakeholders are notified about meetings in advance. One reason is that such meetings are held very late – just before the start of the budget session. There is not much scope to influence the policies and principles underlying the preparation of the budget, or even expenditure decisions. The Finance Minister occasionally accepts proposals for variations in taxation proposals, but rarely does he look with favour at proposals for changes in expenditure decisions.

The Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA), which has traditionally been consulted by the Finance Minister, has an extremely negative view of the process. One senior official of the BEA interviewed for this study observed:

Consultation does not have any use; it is non-functioning ... it is essentially a show, a tactic of fooling the people... the Minister will do what he wants to do... the bureaucrats will do what they want to do... nothing else will happen'. Referring to the mode of consultation the BEA official observed: 'it is bogus ... bullshit.... you invite so many people in a meeting that its spirit is lost ... different people say different things and at the end of the day you achieve nothing ... no concrete result follows.

He suggested that what was needed was to hold separate meetings [much in advance of the budget session] with different groups of people and then to include their views [s much as possible] in the budget. He stressed on the need for consultation with officials working at the grassroots.

Not everyone attending such meetings, however, consider them mere 'eye wash'. Some consider pre-budget consultation meetings useful and beneficial. One senior official of a think tank – the Policy Research Institute (PRI) – observed:

The Finance Minister is a good listener; he often takes notes and asks supplementary questions. He does not usually contest or defend anything; he holds consultation with an open mind. It is not that he accepts everything that is proposed. What is important is that the Finance Minister never interrupts while others are taking. What he does is to ask for further explanation of a particular point.

Asked to comment on the result of consultation, the PRI official observed:

It would be too much to expect any major influence on the thrust of the budget or principles underlying the budget. What can realistically be expected is to have some changes here and there, although these are not always insignificant; these are needed to fine-tune the budget ... We make lot of suggestions, some of which are accepted, and some rejected. But the consultation continues and there is scope for follow up consultation after the budget is passed.

NGO officials argue that consultation meetings have several advantages. One major advantage, argues an NGO top official who has attended consultation meetings, is that 'it provides an opportunity to the outsiders [like us] to make their points/ arguments known to the government. Although there is no guarantee that their proposals will

always be accepted, these meetings nevertheless provide an opportunity for sharing of ideas and opinion’.

In general, pre-budget consultation takes place mostly after final decisions have been taken on the main trust of the budget, influenced largely by political/ideological commitments of the party in power, and by bureaucratic preferences. Whatever changes are made in the budget relate mostly to sources of income, not to heads of expenditure. Officials of the Finance Ministry interviewed for the purpose of this study have also observed that pre-budget consultation does not lead to any serious action. Consultation is done mostly to get to know the viewpoints of different stakeholders and there is not much scope to make any substantive change to the budget to accommodate their opinions. Those attending such meetings try to raise demands that concern them or their organisations, rather than discussing the overall nature of the budget. The list of demands made by different groups of stakeholders during their meetings with the Finance Minister can be considered as something like ‘shopping lists’. These focus less on policy and more on delivery of goods and services.

Parliamentary committee chairs are no exception to this. There is no single indication of committee chairs asking for the strengthening of parliamentary control of the budget. In fact, they do not seem to be aware of this fundamental aspect of budgetary process. Like other stakeholders, committee chairs were also found to be more concerned with raising allocations for diversifying activities of the ministries that their committees shadowed. They do not appear to be much oriented to important policy issues confronting them.

THE PARLIAMENTARY STAGES OF THE BUDGET PROCESS

The budget in the Parliament follows a number of steps – presentation, general discussion, discussion on demands for grants, and passage. Every year, the Finance Minister presents a budget to the Parliament. It is usually placed in early June. In the first part of the two-part budget speech, the Finance Minister provides an elaborate and up-to-date account of the state of the economy and polity. In the second part of the speech, the Finance Minister provides details of the proposed fiscal measures. He also introduces the finance bill on the budget day. No discussion on the budget takes place on the day in which it is presented to the House. After the presentation of the budget, the House is usually adjourned for a few days in order to give members enough time to go through the main budget statement as well as other documents so that they can participate in the other stages of the budget process in a productive manner.

The second stage usually begins with a general discussion on the supplementary budget, which may continue for a few days. The general discussion on the new budget may also start before the discussion on the supplementary budget is completed. Experience, however, shows that in most cases, it commences before the vote on demands for grants of the supplementary budget begins. The *Rules* provide that only the broad outlines of the budget and principles and policies underlying it can be discussed at this stage. No motion can be moved nor can the budget be submitted to the vote of the House at this stage. The Speaker can prescribe a time-limit for speeches. The general discussion, which normally continues for several days, provides the most important opportunity to the members to express their views on the whole of the budget; they are entitled to raise and discuss any issue they consider important.

It is only during the general discussion on the budget that the backbenchers have a chance to speak in the House in the way they want. Usually more time is allotted for the general discussion of the budget than for other stages. More MPs are allowed to speak in the budget session than at any other time of the year; they are also allowed to speak longer during the budget discussion than at any other time. Experience shows that members frequently use the opportunity to raise controversial issues that are unrelated to the budget. In fact, Speakers of the successive Parliaments have frequently advised members of the need to refer to issues that are more focused on the budget.

The third stage of the budget process commences with the discussion on demands for grants and appropriations. Usually a separate demand for grants is proposed for each ministry; the Finance Minister, however, can include in one demand grants proposed for more than one ministry. The *Rules* do not allow any motion aimed at increasing expenditure. Nor can any motion be moved for altering the destination of a grant. It is at this stage the members can move motions to reduce expenditure. The *Rules* allow the members to move three types of motions for expenditure cuts. These are referred to as policy cuts, economy cuts and token cuts. Members move a large number of cut motions but only a small percentage of such motions are accepted. Those that are accepted do not have any realistic prospect of being passed; these are either defeated along party lines or are withdrawn by members. After the votes on cut motions, the

Finance Minister moves the Appropriation Bill, which is invariably passed. This marks the end of the budget process in Parliament.¹⁴

THE BUDGET IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN

After its announcement, the budget becomes a public document. Until recently, formal deliberation on the budget outside of the House was an exception. Traditionally, Opposition parties condemned the budget as an ‘anti-poor’ policy, and often called *hartals* (work stoppages) to register their protest; while the Government and its supporters lauded the budget as an example of Government achievement in moving the country forward. There was not much scope for informed public scrutiny of the budget.

The situation, however, has changed over the years, with some local think tanks/CSOs, particularly Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), *Unnayan Samannaya*, and Policy Research Institute (PRI), making in-depth comments on the budget immediately after its introduction in the House. *Unnayan Samannaya* has also played an important role in providing technical support to the MPs during the budget session by helping the Parliament Secretariat organise a help desk, which lawmakers have found very useful. The help desk offers help to all MPs who need it. Statistics show that the number of MPs turning to the help desk has increased over the years – from 50 in 2012 to 97 in 2013 and 134 in 2014.

An evaluation carried out by USAID observed: ‘MPs and staff who are involved in that process uniformly stated that the Help Desk has enabled MPs to deliver more fact-based, relevant budget speeches than previously, when the statements tended to be based on political platitudes instead of facts and figure’.¹⁵ *Unnayan Samannaya* assists the Parliament’s help desk in producing a variety of written products, including preparing budget speeches to assist MPs in understanding the budget process and key issues. Among these are compendiums on the national budget and the national development plan, which serve as references for MPs and staff on the budget process and development planning; mid-term analyses of the budget; budget notes on key

¹⁴ Bangladesh Parliament, *Rules of Procedure*.

¹⁵ USAID, *Final Performance Evaluation of the Promoting Democratic Institutions and Practices Project*. Dhaka: USAID, 2015, p. 18.

sectors; newspaper clippings of budget analysis; and a booklet analysing the overall budget called *How About This Year's Budget?*.

Deliberations by different CSOs on the budget provide an important source of information that was not available until recently. Some CSOs specialise in budget-related issues, of which Democratic Budget Movement (DBM) is the most important. SUPRO (Campaign for Good Governance) also organises pre-budget and post-budget consultations in different parts of the country. Both organisations have in recent years used the PCNPB as a mechanism to promote their ideals. The PCNPB can be considered the 'brain-child' of DBM, which has long popularised the idea of decentralised budgeting. It provides secretarial support to PCNPB which includes, among other things, helping it organise pre-budget consultations in different places, preparing notes on different aspects of the budget and distributing these among its members, and providing funds on a limited scale to organise different activities. The PCNPB is a multi-party organisation composed of members of Parliament (MPs) belonging to different parties. A former Deputy Speaker is the chair of the Caucus.

The main objectives of (PCNPB) are to:

- Bring necessary amendments to the Constitution and the Rules of Parliamentary Procedure to ensure the effective role of the Parliament in the national plan and budgetary process.
- Ensure the mass of people's participation, with the objective of further democratising national planning and budgeting process.
- Create necessary institutional structures and processes aimed at involving the locally elected public representatives in an effective manner with the national planning and budget process.
- Ensure the role of all public representatives including the MPs in reviewing and monitoring the activities of the executive branch of the government.

As stated above, the PCNPB works in close collaboration with SUPRO and DBM. Such collaboration is based on solid grounds. SUPRO has a much stronger grassroots network than DBM. It organised pre-budget consultation meetings in 45 districts (out of 64) and held a high-level pre-budget discussion meeting in Dhaka about a month before the 2016-17 budget was placed in the House on 2 June 2016. Some Caucus members as well as MPs attended the meeting. Findings of the consultation meetings held at the district level were tabled in the Dhaka meeting and it was reported that budgetary demands made in different district level meetings were sent to the Ministry of Finance for action. SUPRO also organised a post-budget press conference a few days after the budget was presented. Several issues were discussed and recommendations

made to make the budget more 'pro-people'. Such deliberations provided an important opportunity for different stakeholders to share information and ideas.

PCNPB has more close relations with DBM than with any other CSO. A specialised Dhaka University research organisation – Centre on Budget and Policy – also provides support to the Caucus. These three organisations have collectively done some important work related to the budget. What is particularly important to note is that unlike the past, when the Caucus followed the lead of others in dealing with budget-related issues, in recent years it has played a key role. As examples, reference can be made to the organisation by the Caucus of pre-budget meetings in four divisions and a National Budget Convention (People's Budget Assembly) in Dhaka in May 2016, making public a preliminary review of the budget 2016-17, and holding a meeting entitled 'National Budget 2016-17 Review' at the media centre of the Parliament. These are some of the concrete examples of the new leadership role of the Caucus. These mark the beginning of a new trend in parliamentary deliberation on the budget outside Parliament.

The Caucus has a strategic view of the budget. Rather than focusing on every aspect of the budget, it accords importance to those sectors that concern the poor and the disadvantaged; for example, education, health, social security, labour and employment, and agriculture, and Indigenous people. For example, the National Budget Convention (People's Budget Assembly), organised by the Caucus in collaboration with others in May 2016, which was attended by people belonging to different professions, observed that the planned outlay of the budget was unlikely to bring the expected benefits mostly because of the fact that those responsible for implementation were unlikely to ensure the quality of expenditure and its appropriate use. It raised two concerns which it thought were unlikely to be addressed: a strategy for inclusive growth and measures for reducing the ever increasing income inequality. The Caucus made several demands for structural reforms, including decentralisation of the budget, reintroduction of district budgets and devolution of policy areas such as health, primary education and agricultural extension to local government. In an interview, one of the main leaders of the Caucus noted that its members would raise issues of inequality – both income and regional – during deliberations on the budget.

This marks a new trend in the scrutiny of the budget. Unlike the past when the MPs did not show much interest in any such exercise, the Caucus on the Budget has heralded a new beginning, although it is difficult to specify the extent to which it will be able to emerge as a viable institution. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the Caucus is to devise ways to effectively communicate its views to those who matter – Finance Minister and the Prime Minister. The Caucus often invites the State Minister

for Finance to its pre-budget consultation meetings; however, he does not appear to have any influence over the way decisions on the allocation of resources are made. Nor can every member of the Caucus be seen as equally active. Some are more active than others. One caucus member even expressed ignorance about the fact that he was a member. Two women members of the Caucus also expressed the view that they did not know much about what the Caucus was doing. They attend meetings of the Caucus, supporting it whenever invited. One of them said that she simply agreed to be a member when someone asked her.

This does not mean that Caucus activities do not have any meaning. One positive advantage is that those dealing with matters related to finance will at least have an idea about what the MPs think about the budget. Much of what the MPs say inside the House is structured. Their roles have been predetermined – ruling party MPs will have to say good things about the budget, and the Opposition will say bad things. No major variation has ever been noticed in the behavioural patterns of the Government and Opposition MPs.

PARLIAMENTARY DELIBERATION ON THE BUDGET

The MPs have the opportunity to deliberate on the budget, as stated earlier, at two stages – general discussion on the budget and discussion and vote on demands for grant. Almost all MPs are allowed to take part in the general discussion. For the purpose of analysis here, we focus on the behaviour of the members of the PCNPB. We are particularly interested to determine the extent to which the pre-budget consultation with outside groups and resources made available by DBM (for example, briefing notes, advice etc.) and other organisations (for example, SUPRO) have had any impact on the behaviour of the Caucus members. We have checked word by word deliberation of the Caucus members on the budget for 2015-16. Initial plans to check the budget debates for 2016-17 had to be abandoned as the proceedings have not yet been finalised. Of the total 23 members of the Caucus, 19 took part in the general discussion on the budget for 2015-16.

Our scrutiny shows that the behaviour of Caucus members did not differ in a significant way from that of non-members of the Caucus. Most of the Caucus members lauded the role of the Government in the preparation of the budget. Members belonging to the official Opposition apparently competed with members of the Treasury bench to toe the Government line. Both groups of MPs were more interested in criticising the main Opposition party – the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which boycotted the last election – than assessing the budget.

Some exceptions, however, could be found. In particular, the top leaders of the Caucus, while appreciating some of the measures of the Government, also criticised it for its failure in different fields. In particular, unemployment, inequality, and education received special attention of the senior members of the Caucus; these issues did not find much prominence in budget debates by other members. One possible reason was that most of the leading members of the Caucus belonged to parties ideologically oriented to 'left' and 'left of centre' politics. Issues mentioned above usually find prominence in election manifestos of those parties. Some of the Caucus members, while taking part in the budget debate, acknowledged support provided by different CSOs that helped them perform better in Parliament.

ACTORS, INTERACTIONS AND OUTCOMES: ASSESSING STAKEHOLDERS' OPINIONS

This section explores the opinion of the main actors associated with the budget review process through the Caucus, particularly its members and members of the Technical Committee providing specialist advice and support to it. As stated in an earlier section, the Caucus receives advice and support from two CSOs and one specialised centre. Much of what follows is based on discussion with members of these organisations. The section begins with examining the way in which members of the Caucus perceived its role.

Most of the Caucus members held a positive opinion about the role of the Caucus, with almost everyone claiming it as a new experience. Almost all of the members acknowledged the support of the CSOs which, as some argued, helped them to make informed commentary on the budget. It is widely acknowledged that the MPs lack knowledge, time and resources to critically review the budget. What they do is to focus on the general aspects of the budget; rarely do they concentrate on specific issues unless these have partisan implications. Members of the Caucus found the support provided by the Caucus very useful and informative. The General Secretary of the Caucus observed that one of its main purposes was to propose ways to make the budget participatory; that is, to involve different groups of people in the budget process and to act as a pressure group, exerting pressure upon the Government to realise this goal. One of the problems, as the Secretary observed, was that the Caucus was an NGO-induced organisation; it did not originate in Parliament. He thus argued that its institutionalisation would probably take longer than one might anticipate.

The setting up of the Caucus itself can be seen as an achievement. No such mechanism existed in the past. A member of the Caucus observed that what is needed most is to

adopt measures to make it more active and expressed interest in exploring the ways that these parliamentary bodies worked in other countries. In fact, those providing technical and administrative support to the Caucus—DBM and SUPRO—have observed that many MPs are now becoming interested in its activities, with some requesting information on different aspects of the budget before speaking on it in the House. MPs also ask for clarification on technical points that these organisations gladly provide. These are positive signs.

However, there are challenges in the institutionalisation of the Caucus. One of the prerequisites of institutionalisation is to create a ‘critical mass’ – spreading the idea of the Caucus to as many MPs as possible and using them for promoting its cause. It will require a respectable tally of MPs willing to work with local leaders and local people, promoting the idea of decentralisation and public participation in the budget process. It is, however, very difficult to get MPs on board. As the head of DBM observed, many MPs erroneously think that the Caucus is an anti-government body. This implies that partisanship still reigns supreme. This attitude needs to change. DBM wants to help the Caucus institutionalise. As a step to achieve the goal, it plans to organise different activities throughout the year. These include orientation sessions for the MPs, holding constituency-based public hearings on different issues that concern the common people such as health, education and safety net programs, and promoting long term relations between the Caucus and different standing committees. As a DBM official observed:

We want to use the Caucus as a proxy ... Our main purpose is to strengthen the standing committees (SCs), to have dialogue with them. Parliament does not have any direct link with the people ... Such links can be established through SCs. SCs can travel to your place. Similarly, you can also turn to SCs to get things done. We may take our Caucus members to SC meetings to give them a message that you need to do more ... Since SCs do not do many important things, we want to set examples through the Caucus so that SCs can emulate.

Another problem is to have access to sufficient resources to organise different events. In other words, problems of finance will also figure prominently if DBM wants to promote the ideals of participatory budgeting and to involve the MPs in the process. DBM appears to be aware of the problem; it has already started collaboration with like-minded organisations. As a first step towards making the collaboration a success, DBM and 16 other CSOs helped the Caucus organise the 2016 National Budget Convention in Dhaka.

Perhaps the greatest risk in the institutionalisation of the Caucus is uncertainty about the re-election of most of its active members. Those members who appear to be serious about making the Caucus work have been ideologically oriented to 'left' politics. Those providing technical support to the Caucus are their ideological 'soul mates'. One can find some kind of fusion of ideological interests in the formation and working of the Caucus. But Caucus members belonging to other parties – AL and JP – do not appear to have any serious interest in its working. If and when inclusive parliamentary elections are held in the future, it is unlikely that the active members of the Caucus will be able to get elected. The AL MPs who have the prospect of being elected are unlikely to promote the ideals of the Caucus without the permission of the party. It is quite unlikely that any major party will ever support the formation and working of any such initiative. Nor do MPs belonging to the two main parties – AL and BNP – appear to be really keen to form such forums.

There is, however, a case for optimism about parliamentary reform, or at least about maintaining and perhaps strengthening parliament-civil society relations, even in the case of this Caucus becoming defunct and a new Caucus not being formed. The main architect of the Caucus observed that even if it did not exist, the spirit underlying its formation would exist. To understand this, one has to know the background to the formation of the Caucus and the philosophy underlying its work. To quote him:

The formation of Caucus was more informal than formal. Those who are its members have strong 'friendship ties'. We held many informal meetings before its formation. Those attending such meetings are of similar age. Even if some of the members are not elected in the next election, we will continue undertaking the kind of activities the Caucus is doing, may be under the banner of ex-MPs' Caucus. We will use this forum as a platform outside the House. We have already started networking with like-minded organisations ... 17 organisations joined us in organising this year's National Convention on the Budget. This collaboration will continue in the future.

As stated earlier, another CSO – SUPRO – has also worked with the Caucus and MPs for several years. It has also planned some important activities for MPs. SUPRO has decided to work with MPs, no matter whether a Parliament is elected properly or not, and whether its legitimacy is recognised or not. The General Secretary of SUPRO observed:

We do not want to ignore the MPs; rather we want to involve them in different activities through an education process. We don't have representation in Parliament. So if we want to influence Parliament, we

need access to MPs. We need MPs to raise ‘our’ issues in the House. We have thus decided to work with the MPs’ Caucus.

SUPRO has devised a five-year plan, one of whose important elements is to work with MPs in a more structured way. It has targeted two standing committees – Finance and Planning – and decided to work with their members in the next few years. Two main objectives that underlie SUPRO interaction with the MPs and committee members are: first, to organise pre-budget discussion with the participation of MPs; and second, to take MPs to the grassroots. SPRO Secretary observed:

We will invite MPs to District consultations we organise throughout the year. People will listen to what they (MPs) want to say; they should also be able tell the MPs what they want them to do. MPs usually don’t have direct interaction with the people after the elections – there may be one-to-one MP-constituency contact, but not many programmatic interactions – ... through our regular district consultation we want to bridge the gap.

What is especially important to note, as the SUPRO Secretary has observed, is that there is now a kind of demand-driven interaction between the two; this is in sharp contrast to the supply-driven interaction that existed in the past. For example, MPs now want a quarterly report from the civil society perspective on the implementation of the budget. Part of the reason is that they probably want to tally the claims of the Finance Minister in quarterly reports tabled in the House on the implementation of the budget with reports provided by the civil society, to see where there are any discrepancies and what reasons lie behind them. The Parliament Secretariat generally cannot provide this support, mostly because of a lack of trained staff support.

SUPRO has agreed to this request from the MPs. It also has plans to organise events and meetings every three months, using members of the Caucus as the focal point. Probably one of the important successes of the CSO interaction with MPs over the years is that MPs have become more accessible. MPs want some kind of intellectual support from the CSO that the Parliament Secretariat cannot provide. The SUPRO Secretary observed: ‘If we want MPs to talk about our concerns and issues in Parliament, we need to provide such intellectual support to them’. DBM has now formed a group of 11 people who can provide ready support on different issues to the Caucus, preparing position papers for the MPs on the 11 areas of the budget.

The SUPRO Secretary has observed:

Many MPs now express interest to attend our District level consultation meetings. We have, as a matter of principle, decided to involve them with our different activities in at least 45 Districts where we work. Earlier we

did not have much interaction with them. Now we invite them almost as a routine. We have also decided to work with possible MP candidates in different Districts. We will identify four/five MP aspirants in each constituency and make them part of our consultation process, will share our demands (for actions) with them and those who will be elected will certainly be, in one sense, our 'people'. We have a plan to devise projects with MPs as the main focus in the future.

The Secretary further said:

Our main strength is our non-party image. We do not support or oppose any MP or party. We work for the people and with the people. MPs also want a platform to speak up their mind that they cannot do in party forums or Parliament. Thus, whenever we invite, they readily accept it. They openly say that we do not have role in the Parliament except thumping the table, expressing support to the party. We enjoy some freedom to say what we want to say [in this forum]. Media can also quote us.

It is evident from the discussion above that better scope exists for MP-CSO interaction now than in the past. Both perceive mutual benefits from such interaction. The extent to which such interaction has had any impact on parliamentary behaviour is difficult to ascertain. What, however, can be observed is that the recognition by CSOs that they need the support of the MPs to promote their cause in Parliament, along with the willingness of the MPs to consider CSOs as an important source of support, is likely to strengthen relations between the two. In the long run, this is likely to help promote democratic consolidation in the country. Assessing the success or failure of such interaction only on the basis of whether any change has been made in the budget is likely to be defective; interaction has a larger meaning that has not yet been recognised by many or explored in detail.

CONCLUSION

It is widely recognised that the MPs do not have much scope to influence the outcome of the budget. They mostly play a reactive role. This, however, does not automatically imply that the deliberation on the budget is something like *tamasha* (fun). To the contrary, issues of national importance – economic, political and social – frequently come up for discussion during the budget discussion. Senior and experienced Opposition members have frequently made critical comments on the Government's economic policies, challenging Government arguments and specifying the areas where deficiencies can be found. It has also become customary for members and in particular,

senior MPs, including Finance Ministers, to provide comparative data to counteract each other's arguments.

One of the important advantages of such debates is that much information that is otherwise not available or is extremely difficult to collect, becomes public. Discussion on the general budget has at least a publicising effect, if not much operational effect. In particular, it allows members to publicise the Government's weaknesses in fiscal management. This may influence Government thinking when it takes subsequent decisions on financial matters. The decision to broadcast live parliamentary debates on radio is also likely to have some significance. It will help members reach their constituents, raising their demands, and communicating the government's faults that, in the long run, may influence the Government to be receptive to alternative proposals.¹⁶

There is now better scope for public engagement in the budget process than before. Both the Government as well as parliamentarians now appreciate the role of such engagement. Although no significant change follows such engagement, it is nevertheless seen as an important step toward making the budget process more transparent and accountable. As stated earlier, most of the MPs who have had interaction with different CSOs during the budget session appreciate the different kinds of support provided by them.

The Parliament Secretariat is also learning new ways of responding to the demands of the MPs. Engaging CSOs to provide specialised support to MPs during the budget session is a prime example. The readiness of the Finance Minister to seek the opinions of different stakeholders on the budget can be seen as a new trend. None of those attending such consultation meetings dismiss their value outright, although some are critical of different aspects of such meetings. Support provided by CSOs to the creation of the PCNPB can be seen as a laudable step. It can be seen as an important step toward institutionalising interaction between parliamentarians and CSOs. The significance of public engagement thus should not be underestimated.

¹⁶ N. Ahmed, *Limits of Parliamentary Control: Parliament and Public Expenditure in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: UPL, 2006, p. 162.