PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE: CONCEPTUALISATION IN BANGLADESH CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

To comply with the demand of the international aid agencies, the government of Bangladesh is trying to develop participatory local government to support overall good governance for effective development of aid assisted projects. However various donors are concerned that this participation is not effective. This research has been conducted on Bangladesh local governance to find why this may be the case. Part of this study focused on how people's participation matters to the stakeholders of rural development projects in the country. The findings showed that the meaning of the notion of good governance through effective people's participation that has been imported from the developed democratic economies through international aid agencies remains somewhat unclear and ambiguous in rural Bangladesh.
Keywords: Good Governance, People's Participation, Local Government, Social services, Public Sector Reform, Social Capital.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing good governance in developing countries has been demanded by the international aid agencies and donor countries as a prerequisite of aid assistance for a long time (Santiso 2001, 2003). This approach was started in 1989 after the World Bank first recognized the crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa as a crisis of governance, and identified good public management as a precondition of the development assistance strategies for developing countries (Azmat & Coghill 2005; Kaufmann, Kraay & Mastruzzi 2003). To comply with the demand of the donors, governments of the developing countries are trying to develop participatory local government to support overall good governance (Romeo 2003).

Like other developing countries the Government of Bangladesh has also taken several initiatives through decentralisation and reforms in the governing system, particularly in the local government system to ensure good governance through people's participation (Sarker 2006; Siddiqui 2005). Rural people in Bangladesh have now obtained opportunities to participate in local development programs (Morshed 2007; Siddiqui 2005). But several research studies showed that the participation in local development programs in rural Bangladesh is not being effective for the achievement of good governance (Mahmud 2004; UNDP 2002; Zafarullah & Khan 2005). Mahmud argued that the local people are not mentally ready to participate in local development programs (Mahmud 2004). According to her findings, local villagers cannot assess the value of their own engagement in local development programs, and thus they do not participate in such programs (Mahmud 2004). But participation is not a one sided event, it is a marriage between service providers and service receivers (Gaventa 2004). Particularly in developing countries, participation greatly depends on the activities and attitude of the local elected representatives and government officials who are working in local government institutions (Aminuzzaman 2006; Bardhan 2002). Thus it has appeared important to know how different stakeholders such as government officials, public representatives, private sector and citizens have been approaching to ensuring people's engagement in local development programs.

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Hence a question appears: whether the relevant stakeholders in Bangladesh, responsible for ensuring good governance through people's participation, correctly perceive the value of participation and understand their role in achieving participatory good governance. No study so far has fully revealed whether service providers understand the value of people's participation or local people understand their importance in joining with local developments in Bangladesh. Considering the urgency, this research has set to explore how the value of people's participation is perceived by concerned stakeholders in rural Bangladesh.

PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

In developing countries, the slogan of 'people or community participation' or 'bottom-up approach' has been ushered into development programs by the development partners channelling aid assistance during the end of the 1980s. In fact people's participation has been introduced, together with good governance, as the vital element in achieving effective outcomes of aid assistance in developing countries. Social researchers, side by side with donors, stipulate that good governance can only be achieved by incorporating the community's knowledge into their social and political life (Gaventa 2002; Lowndes & Wilson 2001). The basic philosophy of participation is to give locals a meaningful role in local government decisions that affect them. Gaventa argued that 'a first key challenge for the 21st century is the construction of new relationships between ordinary people and the institutions – especially those of government – which affect their lives' (Gaventa 2004, p. 25).

In the explanation to this concept, researchers have stated that now local governance is not a single actor function. It is now a pluralistic function and more definitely it is a local people-led function, which is actually 'community governance' (Carley 2006; Rhodes 1997; Sullivan 2001). Development works without people's participation failed to alleviate poverty and 'suffer from a lack of sustainability' (Khwaja 2004, p. 427). Empirical evidence suggests that community participation is an 'unqualified good' in terms of project outcomes and sustainability (Isham, Narayan & Pritchett 1995; Khwaja 2004, p. 428). So, international aid agencies like UNDP and the World Bank have introduced poverty reduction strategies in developing countries through participatory development programs (Eversole, McNeish & Cimadamore 2006). A calculation shows that the aid assistance by the World Bank for 'community-driven development' projects has risen from $325 million in 1996 to $2 billion in 2003 (Mansuri & Rao 2004). This data thus indicates a growing trend of people's participation for effective use of aid by ensuring good governance all around the world.

RELATION OF PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION WITH GOOD GOVERNANCE

Participation is, as the World Bank (1996) defines, a process through which people influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them. Many

social scientists have argued about the participation process as a social transformation mechanism, where the power of the implementing agency is transferred to the civil society (Brett 2003; Carley 2006; Siroros 2002). They have further argued that people's participation is effective when people's empowerment reaches a position that resulting in enhanced influence over decision-making, monitoring and evaluation processes (Brett 2003; Cooper, Bryer & Meek 2006).

Different social scientists have recommended different stages of people's participation process in local development programs. A metaphoric eight rung ladder of participation process has been articulated by Arnstein (1971), which is: i) Manipulation, ii) Therapy, iii) Informing, iv) Consultation, v) Placation, vi) Partnership, vii) Delegated power and viii) Citizen control. In contrast, Wilcox (1994) and the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2 2003) proposed five stages of people's participation, which are: 1) Inform: one way communication, 2) Consult: two-way communication, 3) Involve: Deciding together, 4) Collaborate: Acting together, and 5) Empower: Supporting independent community interests. The stages 'involve' and 'collaboration' are symbiotic, together covering people's participation as working jointly, so this study merges them, and identifies the four stages of participation as: 1) Inform, 2) Consult, 3) Involve and 4) Empower.

It is argued that an effective participation or empowered people can make governance more accountable, more transparent and more legitimate (JICA 1995). This argument thus recognizes that the level of good governance increases through people's heightened participation in development programs. On the basis of the level of people's participation, four models have been developed by researchers (Chadwick & May 2003; Gibson, Lacy & Dougherty 2005; Newman 2007) to describe qualities of governance. These are: 1) Managerial model –top down approach of implementation, marginal scope for people's participation; 2) Legislative model –decision making process initiated from the top to develop a common agenda through consulting the people; 3) Limited community participation model –engage community to open up the decision making process that finally generates harmony within the governing body and/ or within the community; and 4) Community empowerment model –bottom up approach that happens because of extensive community participation. Thus, we find that the good governance can be achieved through continuous endeavour to empower the people, and the levels of governance-qualities increase with the increase of participation-levels. As a working proposition, there seems to be a good correlation between the stage of participation and the model of governance that can be depicted along the following lines:

Stage of Participation	Model of Governance
(IAP2 2003; modified)	(Gibson, Lacy and Dougherty 2005; modified)
Stage-1: Inform- a one-way process, when the governing agency tells people about their	**Authoritarian Model:** in this model a decision comes from the top and is implemented mostly by

decision before or during implementation of development programs.	bureaucrats. Total process of program is not transparent, accountable and predictable.
Stage- 2: Consult- a two-way communication, but engagement of people is limited within the decision making of the program. Governing agency is used to inform people to get feedback but makes decision and implements unilaterally.	**Bureaucratic Model:** in this model people's participation is not enough to ensure the transfer of power. The process of program is less transparent and less predictable, and the agency remains accountable to the top not to the people.
Stage- 3: Involve- at this stage governing agency not only listens to people to make decision, but also engages people for budget distribution and implements the program together. Usually the whole community does not get the scope to be engaged in this process.	**Political Model:** in this model people's participation is enough, but people are engaged in the development programs in different segments that may evolve conflicts. Governing agency is transparent and accountable to a group of people but not to the whole community.
Stage-4: Empower- at this stage the governing agency allows developing the capacity of people to come with their decisions and resources to implement development programs jointly. Agency works as a facilitator.	**Democratic Model:** this model allows developing partnerships with people, delegate authority to make decisions and implements program with the sharing of local knowledge. Total process of the program is highly transparent, accountable and predictable.

Table1: Relation of people's participation with good governance.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The phenomenon of people's participation in development programs is demanded mostly in developing countries for effective development (Fung & Wright 2001). Here effective development means the development that will come under productive use by the highest number of users. Researchers have argued that effective people's participation can ensure accountability, transparency and legitimacy, i.e. good governance during implementing any development programs, which consequently ensure effective development (Sirker & Cosic 2007; Sullivan 2001). Considering the context, we can draw a figure in relation to people's participation with development outcomes as follows:

Action People's participation in local development programs	→	**Outcome** Uphold good governance and ensure effective development

Fig 1: Primary conceptual frame

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Several researchers have articulated that the impact of the people's participation phenomenon is not so straightforward. Researchers found that people's participation in development programs actually helps in two ways. On the one hand it helps to empower people; on the other hand, it enables a suitable structure within institutions for establishing good governance (Gaventa 2002). Similarly, it is argued that people's participation in a normative way is helping in achieving good governance, while in an instrumental way it is helping to ripen the effective empowering of people which impacts on the synergic effect for effective development (Khwaja 2004; Paul 1987). This triangular relationship between participation, governance and development can be shown in the following figure:
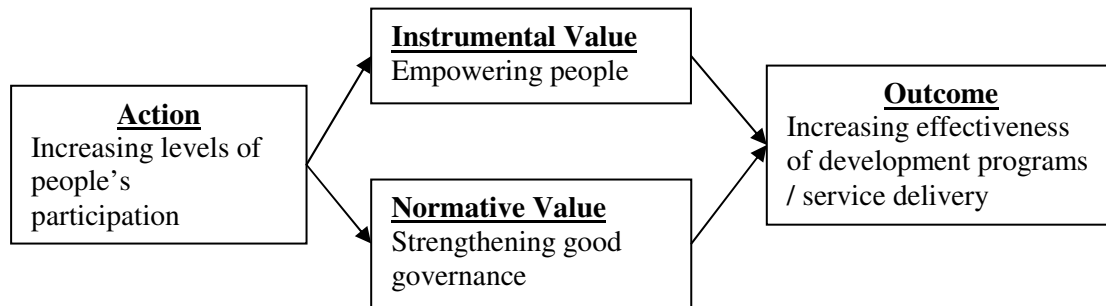

Fig 2: Derived Theoretical Frame

However, through the literature review it is revealed that empowering people is a continuous process which goes through different stages. At the same time, the level of governance may also shift according to the level of participation. Hence, considering all the above concepts, the following conceptual framework has been developed to conduct this research.
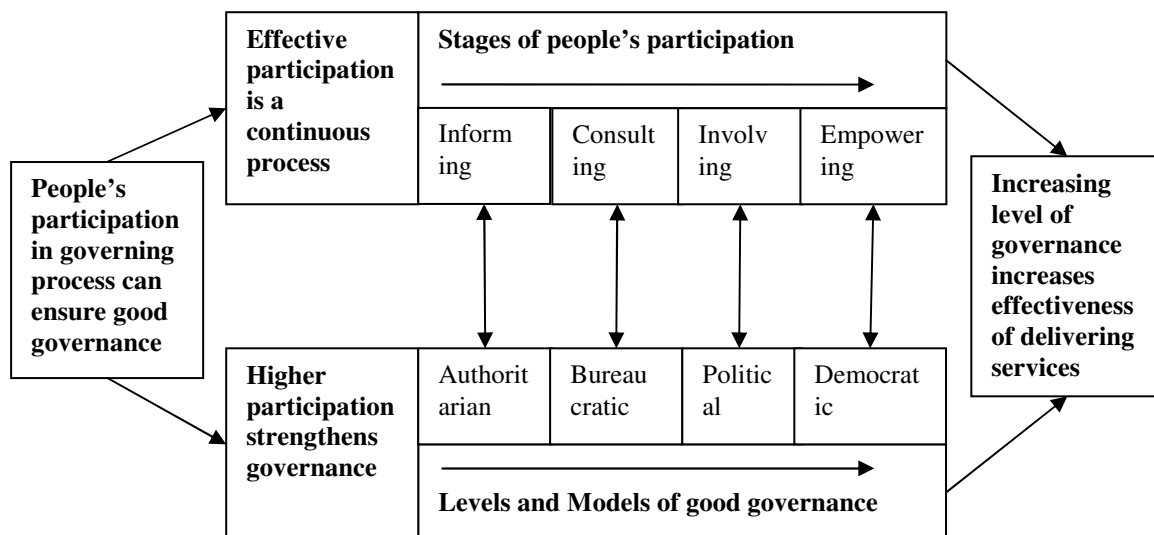

Fig 3: Conceptualised Theoretical Framework

The above conceptual framework provides an outline of the interrelated factors that the research demonstrates can contribute to people's participation. The independent variable, that is, 'people's

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participation' has direct impact on immediate dependant variables like 'good governance' and 'capacity building of people', and this subsequently impacts on ensuring effective development.

THE CASES AND DATA COLLECTION

Three Bangladesh local government institutions have been selected to see how the concepts of people's participation for good governance are perceived in Bangladesh by different stakeholders responsible for ensuring good governance. As an epistemological issue, that is, the attitude of stakeholders to the value of people's participation can hardly be exposed by measuring 'on a physical scale' (Schulze 2003, p. 12), a qualitative approach appeared the best option to conduct this research (Kaplan & Maxwell 2005).

Two cases, namely the 'Rural Growth Centre (Infrastructure of rural market) Development Project' and the 'Primary School Development Project', from each of three selected rural local government bodies (Upazila) in Bangladesh were selected to investigate how stakeholders related to these projects valued the importance of people's participation while implementing and using these projects. These three Upazilas are distinguished by different socio-economic parameters: mainly economic status and literacy rate. Three major actors, like government officials, elected representatives and expected beneficiaries, were interviewed face-to-face and in groups to explore their perception of people's participation in local government programs. Government officials of different line ministries were interviewed as they worked in the Upazila Parishad on secondment. In fact, this research study mainly focused, for interview, on those people who were related to the implementation of selected local development projects. Government officials from local to ministry levels, local elected representatives and expected beneficiaries those who had a role and stake with those selected development projects were approached for interview. In total, 13 government officials, 21 elected representatives, 106 expected beneficiaries were interviewed individually and in groups. The semi-structured questionnaires were used for interviews. Data from different cases and multiple sources/stakeholders have been taken into account for triangulation, and thus helped 'to avoid the charge of bias' (Funnell 1996, p. 169).

The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed into text manually. The interview texts were then organised under different broad descriptive codes with NVivo software. Once organised, data were further coded into different categories to allow emergence of thematic ideas for necessary analysis. However, analyses were mostly completed manually to get deep understanding (Welsh 2002) of research data. Triangulation of data from all cross- sectional socio-economic environments and multiple sources like community, local leaders and government bureaucrats was applied in the critical interpretation of the data, as triangulation of wide range of data helps to get greater validation, reliability and predicative value (Fielding & Fielding 1989).

FINDINGS: PERCEPTION OF PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN BANGLADESH

The findings about the perceptions of people's participation have been categorised into three sections: valued by the public officials, valued by the public representatives, and valued by the locals or expected beneficiaries.

1. As perceived by the government bureaucrats:

Most (69 percent) of the government bureaucrats interviewed, believe that people should participate in local development activities through their representatives. According to their views, rural people are illiterate and are always troublemakers. Thus bureaucrats are not interested in bringing them to the decision making table; rather, as they believe, local elected representatives are enough to make any decision for the local people. For instance one government officials supported that:

> *I think the present UP (Council) Chairman and his Members (Member of that Council) work properly, which can ensure people's participation.*

These bureaucrats further pointed out that they are perfectly engaging locals by informing them about the programs.

> *For every development work we hang a signboard at the site. If the project is funded by donors, we usually write it in English for the convenience of Donors when they visit the project area.*

Conversely, 5 out of 13 government officials interviewed, mainly mid level engineers and officials in education department, do not even believe in local people's participation. These government bureaucrats claim that they have more knowledge and information than local people, and hence they are enough to make a decision that will effectively benefit the local people.

> *We are working in this area and we know all the pros and cones better than local people and their representatives, thus we are the best section to identify and select any development project within this area.*

Some other bureaucrats, on the other hand, mentioned that the mode of participation is a subject for the central government. They pointed out that they are just implementers of the government decisions; the policy is formulated by the policymakers at the central level, and officials at field level have been asked to follow those policies. When they were asked to include local beneficiaries in the decisions affect locals, 75 percent of government officials working in executive levels in Upazilas posited:

> *How we will do that? To do government jobs or to implement government programs we need to follow government instruction and rules. If we are not instructed to involve people directly we cannot do so, because we are government servants.*

> *The government asks us to ensure the participation of people via elected representatives; not via direct participation of people. So, we include local representatives in the project.*

2. As perceived by the elected public leaders:

Like bureaucrats, local elected representatives also believe that they (public leaders) are the proper section to ensure people's participation in local development programs. According to their view, they are elected by the local people through the democratic process so that they are actually working as a

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spokesperson at the decision making table, instead of the people, and the people have bestowed a mandate on them to do so. Eighty-six percent of public leaders interviewed assumed that:

> *People elected us to look after all the' positives and negatives' that affect them, so I don't find any further need to ask every person about their opinion.*

> *People are mostly loyal and obedient, but there are exceptions as well. I don't want more independent management committees like SMC [School Management Committee]; because of SMC we the chairmen [Union Council Chairman] have lost our authority over the local school.*

When they were asked about direct people's participation they replied like bureaucrats: *inviting people [for any decision] means inviting trouble*.

Fourteen out of twenty-one public leaders interviewed, believe that they have been truly representing rural people for a long time, and this is the perfect practice to ensure people's participation effectively. However, these public leaders, mostly from rich socio-economic background though not high educated, expressed their limitations (controlling power regarding authority and funds) in being able to act unreservedly to reflect people's intentions in local development programs. They perceived that involving locals will not lead to any change unless they are provided with adequate power for handling authority and funds.

> *No, involving locals could not bring any better results while the funds are controlled by the officials. We need more power, both to handle the funds and, at the same time, to control the officials.*

> *People are already participating through their representatives at the moment, but we need more power over the local bureaucrats. And we need direct funding so that we can implement development programs according to our choice.*

Yet, other elected public representative, from low socio-economic background but well educated, are found not to be vocal to claim controlling power, rather pleased with ongoing process of participation, and are happy with officials' involvement in development programs.

> *However, the selection of projects by the officials is logical and relevant in most cases. Personally I am happy with the activities undertaken by the local officials. If there is any Upazila chairman, like the present MP, he supports development projects for his own locality. The lion's share of the development fund is used for their own area. But a bureaucrat is an outsider; he has no bias on locality. So we are receiving an equal share of the development fund.*

3. As perceived by local stakeholders:

Most of the local people do not have any idea about their participation in local development programs. They believe that they should not have any scope to participate in development activities that are carried out by local government body. Seventy-six percent of expected beneficiaries interviewed, consider all local development works are government's function, which should be done by government officials.

> *This [a primary school] is a government program and government is paying local bureaucrats to look after these activities. This is their [officials] job to conduct; our involvement may cause annoyance to them.*

When local people were asked [during interview] whether they want to participate in the local development programs, 49 percent, mostly from high socio-economic background, spontaneously agreed that they wanted to participate and assured that they could achieve a better outcome than the present one.

> *Of course we wanted to participate all along in the program but nobody called us. We elected our leader to speak for us, but he serves the purpose of officials*

However, 80 percent of them, mainly from low socio-economic background, do not want to participate as they are scared of government rules and regulations.

> *We are poor businessmen, we don't know much about government laws to handle government functions. We may be framed for any anomalies and sent to jail. Allah [God] will see everything, not we.*

However, some other local people (33 percent) are interested in joining for limited functions, not for all. They believe their involvement should be limited only to what can fulfil their interest in that program. These people are mostly from remote, illiterate and low socio-economic backgrounds. When they were asked to nominate their desired way to participate in local government programs, they replied:

> *We just want to speak about our problems and needs; we don't want to be involved in budgeting or monitoring or other such business.*

> *We have our own job. This is a government job and our chairman and teacher are sufficient to see to those jobs.*

However, 63 out of 106 rural people interviewed are frustrated with the activities and their relations with local officials and representatives. They have found themselves helpless, and now rely on God for change.

> *Allah [God] made them officials, and they know better than us, so they don't need to discuss anything with us.*

CONCEPTUALISATION OF PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN BANGLADESH

The analysed data revealed that the three actors – government officials, representatives and local people – perceive the meaning of people's participation in different ways. The government bureaucrats perceive representatives are enough for effective participation if they are controlled in proper way, the representatives also think they are perfectly representing local people. On the other hand, local people are completely unaware of their potential for participation; however, some of them do have interest in getting information about the local development programs. Through the interviews it is clear that the expected beneficiaries are hardly informed about the local government programs that affect them. Local government bureaucrats, with the local public representatives, implement all programs without any direct participation. Local people perceive that government works means work that should be done by government officials. Local people are also afraid to participate in government works as there

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are many rules and regulations to follow that is not possible for the mostly illiterate people to know. Similarly, government bureaucrats and representatives think it is their work and they should perform it as assigned. Government bureaucrats are only concerned about their power over representatives and similarly, representatives are concerned about their controlling power over bureaucrats. None of them think about local people, as both of them perceive that *'more people mean more trouble'*. If the analysed data be compared with the research framework, it reveals that there is a clear conceptual gap about people's participation by all actors responsible for ensuring good governance in rural Bangladesh. Their views can be framed as follows:
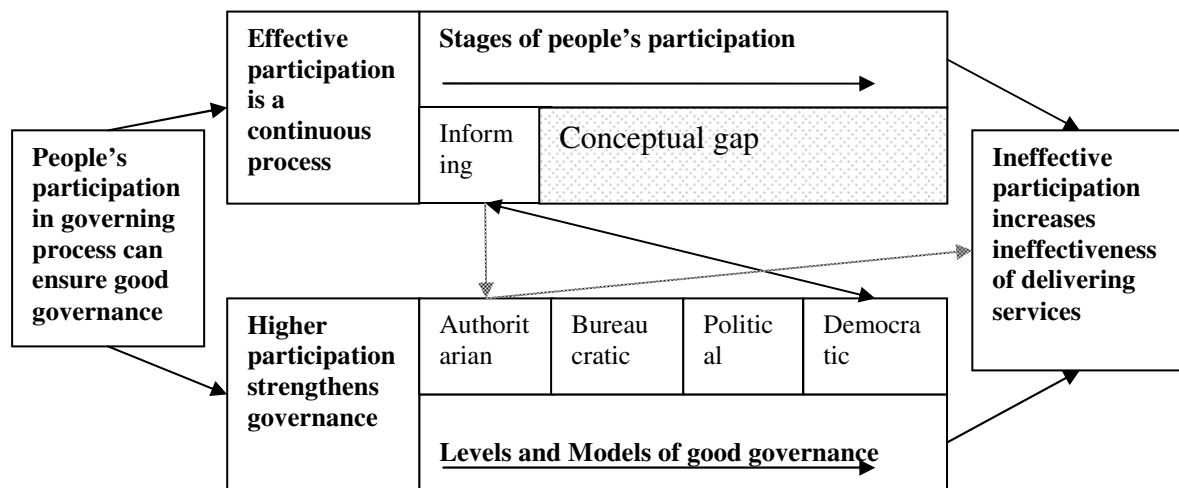

Fig 4: Conceptual gap that leads to ineffective participation

The above figure presents that, none of the actors has any idea about the stages of people's participation and do not know about the value of empowered people. Simply informing local people, they think, is enough to ensure a 'Democratic model' of good governance (see Table-1) for effective development. While in developed society people's empowerment is growing through proper education and continuous participation in local government works (Akkerman 2003; Morphet 2008), in Bangladesh bureaucrats and representatives want to avoid them fearing a loss of power and, above all, corruption. On the other hand locals, mostly illiterate (Sen, Mujeri & Shahabuddin 2004), are not getting any helping hand to be aware and empowered. They only know about the first stage of people's participation. Because of this conceptual gap the development is not becoming effective in rural Bangladesh.

The government of Bangladesh, as well as other development partners who are working in Bangladesh, surely are not aware of this mental-matrix of the stakeholders. Since its independence in 1971, the government has formed more than five committees and commissions to formulate the means to ensure true people's participation (Morshed 2007). The analyses of those recommendations suggest a range of ways to obtain a solution. One group suggested creation of local government institutions at

the ground level that will empower people (Khan 2000; Sarker 2003); another group suggested that delegating authority to existing local government bodies will empower local people (Morshed 2007; Zafarullah & Khan 2005), and these empowered people will then be encouraged spontaneously to participate in local government affairs. Interestingly none of these recommendations suggested any mechanism to develop awareness of different stakeholders for direct people's participation in rural Bangladesh. While researchers suggested that 'public sector organisations need to understand how citizens want to engage with the council, what are their needs and what are their perceptions about the council' (Jones, Hackney & Irani 2007, p. 148), recommendations of concerned committees and commissions posed doubt that the Government of Bangladesh sees any value in direct citizen's engagement. In fact, none of these studies followed 'participatory policy analysis' (Fischer 2007, p. 223) to find effective public policy in term of engaging local peoples with local government bodies. Development workers and governments of developing countries are needed to realise that imposing a sophisticated public policy, which has been working effectively in developed societies, cannot ensure direct people's participation in developing societies unless related stakeholders in the incumbent societies perceive the value of it.

CONCLUSION

The traditional attitudes of stakeholders, responsible for achieving good governance in developing countries, need to change in order to successfully obtain the goal. However, findings of this study indicate that no one's attitude towards the value of people's participation has sufficiently changed to accept the reform of traditional governance towards good governance. Public representatives and government officials do not want to share knowledge with locals. More specifically, government officials and elected representatives do not value direct people's participation; rather they are more concerned to have the controlling power over authority and funds. Local people are also not able to assess the value of their own engagement with local development programs. Thus it can be said that in developing societies like Bangladesh one of the major barriers in achieving good governance is conceptual gap. The development workers and governments of these societies need to include all local stakeholders while formulate any public policy in relation to good governance through direct people's participation. This participatory policy formulation will help to bridge any conceptual gap in local stakeholders. On the other hand, development workers and governing agencies need to include all local stakeholders to explore jointly any barrier to direct people participation in that particular society. This joint investigation will help to find out genuine tools of engagement for local people. There is no *single shoe fits for all* communities. The development workers need to help local stakeholders to find their own *shoes*.

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