



Public Hearing to Facilitate Public Accountability

Public hearing is a formal proceeding held in order to receive testimony from all interested parties – including the general public on a proposed issue or action. Alternatively community can organize public hearing on particular issue to solve the constraint or public suffering.

A public hearing refers to a meeting that is open to the public having specific agenda or a proposal. Presence of stakeholders is highly required for an effective public hearing.

Public hearings are held as part of the public inquiry process. This provides opportunity to the interested parties to express their views or written submissions to this public forum. National Integrity Strategy directed public hearing ,while local community or service recipients can express their views on particular public service.

Public hearings generally don't cost a lot in terms of staff time and money, and this is a great way for an initiative to get message from the public, the media, and elected officials.

For a public hearing, a notice is served to the target audience where specific agenda on a particular issues are listed. Follow up action is required on the decision taken in public hearing to maximize the public interest.

The Cabinet Division of Bangladesh issued a circular on 1 June 2014 urging to organize Public Hearing once in a week. Every government office is directed to fix a day of the week for holding public hearing. In the circular it was also urged for sending monthly PH report to the ministry. The Local Government Division (LGD), under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives has issued a guideline in January 2022 to all Upazila Parishads (UPs) to institutionalize public hearings.

Key issues in the guideline

- Each Union Parishad (UP) is required to hold a public hearing every 15 days and once in a year at the ward level, where the UP Chairman will conduct and chair the hearing, listen to the people, and resolve problems; UPs must choose a date and notify people to attend the public hearing session in advance, which will include all line- department officials.
- The chairman will listen to the people's problems/complaints and take measures to resolve them. All line department officials must attend the public hearing; all issues expressed in the public hearing must be recorded in the register book; necessary actions must be taken to resolve difficulties, and the individual whose issue was resolved must be informed.
- It also stated that, at the public hearing session, both oral and written complaints must be considered, and the issues that correspond to the UPs, involving the relevant UP Chairman must resolve as soon as feasible. In addition, the Union Parishad's monthly meeting must address the public hearing session and interventions, and the sessions will be monitored by DDLG and UNO to ensure that the public hearings are effective.

Public Hearing contribute towards public interest in following way

- Public hearing create opportunity for interaction within the community and decision makers
- Clarify the needs and sense of community concern on a certain issue
- Increase community awareness
- Draw media attention on an issue for news reporting and also follow up report
- To take the pulse of the community
- To find out solution for better service to the community

MJF experience on public hearing for social accountability

Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) under its Excluded Rights Project promoted public hearing to ensure transparency and accountability in social

protection scheme and some other public service provided by the Government agencies and department.

An example of public hearing for protecting rights of farmers

Statement of problem: In September 2021, a citizen led social audit team of Malikhikanda, Dhanshail, Gouripur and Jhenagaiti Sadar union under Sherpur district simultaneously revealed that the authorized fertilizer distributors were not following the Government fixed selling price. Rather they are charging BDT 02 as extra charge for per KG fertilizer from the enlisted farmers. The fertilizer allocation for each farmer was 200 kg and from 1500 farmers the distributors collected BDT 600,000 illegally.

Public Hearing Session: Under above mentioned context, a public hearing session was organized where the farmer's representative, locally elected representatives and community leaders participated along with the Upazila Agriculture Officer. The corruption issues related to taking extra money from the marginalized farmers was raised in the hearing and the framers shared their worst experience for paying extra money.



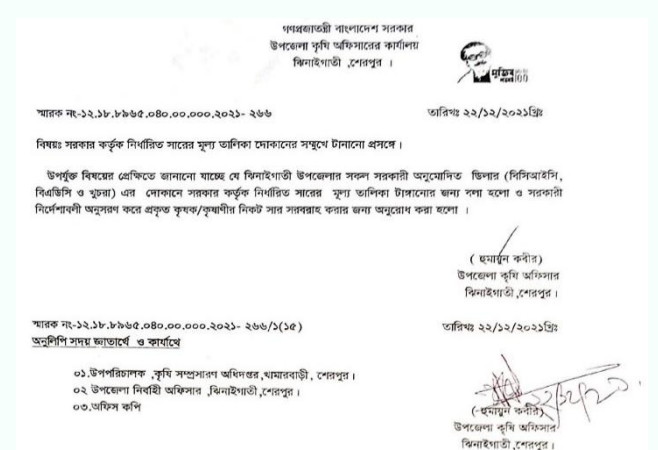
Following discussion, a decision was taken in the meeting that, a notice will be issued to the authorized dealers with a direction that, the fertilizer should be sold as per Government fixed price and for violating this order, action will be taken by the concerned authority. The Upazila Agriculture Office also formed several field level monitoring committee to ensure the transparency in fertilizer distribution process.

As a result of public hearing, a notice was issued by the Upazila Agriculture Office and strong monitoring mechanism was developed to stop the irregularities in fertilizer distribution. Immediately, the situation

has been improved and the ill practice of taking extra money was stopped.

Challenges of holding an effective Public Hearing

- Making the duty bearers of the front line offices being well convinced of the benefits of public hearing
- Letting the right authority attend in the meeting
- Fixing a schedule well before the event day
- Taking a place convenient for the community
- Mobilizing related community groups to participate in the discussion
- Raising specific and related issue in the discussion
- Facilitating the discussion efficiently
- Following up the decisions taken in the public hearing
- Budgeting to organize the event



Issues to be considered by policy makers

- Organize orientation on Public Hearing for Locally Elected Representatives and the employees of Local Government Institutions and local level departments.
- Public Hearing venue should be organized at the location which is convenient to the participants.
- Communities should be well informed about the venue, time and topic prior to the public hearing.
- Develop monitoring mechanism to ensure effectiveness of public hearing.
- Process and guidance should be taken for institutionalization of public hearing engaging public institutions, NGOs and CSO engagement at grassroots level.
- Cost for organizing public hearing meeting is a concern to the local service delivery authorities, proper guidance for the budget should be clarified.