

Bangladesh: “Community Security”

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Increased levels of violence, lack of confidence to interact with security providers, and a state-centred approach to security that included time consuming response processes have led many local community members in Bangladesh to fear discrimination and violence. Since the contested 2014 elections, the deadlock between the ruling parties and the opposition has increased state-level violence in Bangladesh. Over 100 deaths and around 200 cases of severe injuries due to petrol bombing have been reported from January to May 2015.⁴³ The opposition called permanent blockades and frequently countrywide strikes (*hartals*), which lead to additional attacks and disrupt travel and business. Extremist groups and criminal gangs have been thriving in such a volatile climate exposing local communities to increased risk of gender-based violence and abuses related to drugs, alcohol and gambling.

At the same time, communities feel less confident to approach police officials or representatives of the local administration and to ask for sincere, effective and trustful responses to the current problems. High levels of corruption, inadequate staffing and lack of communication have fuelled these suspicious attitudes that persist despite the government’s effort to set up local structures and bodies (Standing Committees for Law and Order and community policing forums called *thana*) to solve the security problems. The fact that Bangladeshi authorities have traditionally seen security as the sole prerogative of the state and prioritised exclusive and reactive responses to state security over more inclusive and proactive human security strategies have only added to communities’ feelings of vulnerability.

The challenge

There are increased levels of violence at the community level and weak relations between police and local communities.

Theory of change:

Build trust, cooperation and collaborative actions between community members and security providers at the local and national levels will improve access to and provision of human security, justice and development.

Saferworld, an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives, and the Bangladeshi NGO BRAC, a development organisation dedicated to alleviating poverty by empowering the poor, implemented a four-year project in 16 sites across five districts of south-western Bangladesh. The programme brings communities together to identify their security needs and enables them to collaborate positively with state security actors in order to find solutions. Saferworld named this approach “community security” because it enables communities to articulate and their needs, participate in the response, and as a consequence feel valued and protected.

Two key elements for this community-centred approach to security are a large-scale participatory assessment of safety-security needs and the establishment of an inclusive consultation process.

Large-scale Participatory Assessment of Security Needs

To assess the context, cases, actors and dynamics behind violence in Bangladesh, Saferworld and BRAC held 80 focus group discussions with a total of 816 participants (cover 43% female) including minorities, women, youth and local authorities. Participants in each locality identified

the UN Development Program. March 2010.

⁴³ See SaferWorld’s report, <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/where/bangladesh> citing *Odhikar* Human Rights Monitoring Report, June 1st 2015.

their specific security issues such as violence against women, sexual harassment, early marriage, child labour, theft, hijacking, drug abuse, gambling, political violence, water logging (flooding of agricultural land) or lack of fair judgment in criminal processes.

Inclusive Consultation Processes

Once the localities had come up with list of the most pressing issues, Saferworld and BRAC supported them to set up a consultation process driven by the “Community Action Committee” (CAC). The CACs are made up of community members with special attention to vulnerable or traditionally excluded members but could also include local government and security representatives. For example, one CAC included farmers, teachers, housewives, members of local women groups, local businessmen, local religious leaders, village police (*chowkider*, *dafadar*) and youth. The selection process is entirely owned by the community. In the beginning, CAC organised project orientation meetings with different level stakeholders to share information about their work and asking support for their activities following the action plan. The committees convene monthly with representatives of an Advisory Committee (made up of local government representatives, local opinion leaders and government frontline officials). At times delegates of the community’s Youth and Women’s Groups also join in to bring up pressing security issues and discuss possible joint solutions.

Photo 18: Action planning workshop with selected community representatives in Gopalganj
Photo credit: Saferworld



An Example: Addressing Sexual Harassment of Girls

If a girl in the community has become a victim of sexual harassment, her parents will either directly report the incident to the CAC or a neighbour of the victim will inform the CAC members. The CAC then decides an appropriate action to take. For example, it will approach the family of the boy who committed the abuse and propose and discuss remedial measures with the family. In case this is not effective, for example because the boy is not sensitive to the influence of his family due to his involvement with the local drug-trafficking mafia, the CAC can take up the issue with the locally elected members. If this failed, it can bring the issue to the attention of the Chairman of the Advisory Committee who represents the local government or it can approach the police. These authorities can then propose more formal punitive measures such as condemning the boy to community service or even imprisonment.

This example shows that the CACs have also been able to work as mediators between the community and police facilitating the reporting of incidents. This function is especially important when dealing with more serious crimes such as rape or murder. When victims or

witnesses are hesitant to report either due to shame or fear of reprisals the CAC can communicate with the local government and police on their behalf.

The CAC consultations with local authorities, police and administration have led to stronger relations between civil society and the security sector. They have achieved a change of attitude and an increased level of collaboration among communities and local government representatives and police officers in the affected communities. Community members have become more confident and proactive about addressing security problems and local government and police officers are showing a greater sense of responsibility and willingness to respond. The project has not only contributed to improving human security but also to fostering social cohesion, strengthening state-society relationships, and increasing state legitimacy and responsiveness and thus advancing the broader human security agenda in Bangladesh.

Saferworld's Operational Handbook on Community-Police Cooperation

The [*Operational Handbook on Community Policy Cooperation*](#) published by Saferworld and Centre for Security Studies in 2010 provides excellent step-by-step guidelines to community-based policing. The manual is part of the national community-based policing strategy that was designed by the Working Team for the implementation of the National Community-Based Policing Strategy and approved by the country's Council of Ministers in 2007. It is primarily designed for police officers but will also be useful to community leaders, representatives of municipal authorities, and other non-police members of consultation processes around human security at the local level. The manual contains templates, checklists and other practical tools for all stages of a community-based policing programme including:

- Analysing the context
- Mobilizing the relevant people
- Identifying community problems
- Designing efficient responses
- Implementing the solutions
- Assessing the impact
- Reaching out to the public

The handbook was produced in close collaboration with police officers and is based on the principle of community ownership.